

Behold Goliath

In this collection of short stories Alfred Chester, author of *Jamie Is My Heart's Desire*, turns a precise and intense perception on people who themselves see life off-centre and who, in moments of heightened emotional agitation, expose the dilemma between their desires and limitations: an illiterate young girl unselfconsciously performing a murder while retaining an innocent reverence for the value of life; a homosexual's haunted and futile pilgrimage through the *pissoirs* of Paris in search of love; a dying girl's enigmatic relationship with a drifting and dubious clairvoyant - these and the other stories in this collection are devastating in their imaginative clarity and the originality and poetry of their expression.

Behold Goliath

A COLLECTION
OF STORIES BY
ALFRED CHESTER



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*For Edward Field
and Maria Irene Fornés*

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Behold Goliath

Cradle Song

O love Larry I never so much as kissed a boy except my cousin Bob twice under a misiltoe at fifteen years of age. If there was ever another I hope God tears Calvin from my bosom like He took you away. But He won't for I was pure as snow tho its hard to believe in consideration of my behavior the very first night we met and not an hour after you walked in on that party. How is it possible that your good self opened the door of Lilah Krinsky's house and let in every devil of hell to grab hold of me. But thats how it was the minute I laid eyes on you with those big bullsholders and thick arms, and those long black lashes that I could see at ten yards away.

He's a railroad engineer, Lilah whispered when she saw my face but you were more to me like a steam engine. Come on she says, I'll introduce you but watch yourself Dolly. He's fast really fast and I dont mean maybe.

Larry I could hardly stand on my legs in front of you but just the same I said yes when you asked me would I care to dance. So we did tho it didn't seem like dancing more like passing away in a dead faint every other second while those black lashes went brushing into the soul of me.

Presently you says Would you care for a highball?
And before I can say No thanks, I never touch the
stuff, you says You look like a girl who can hold a shot or
two. Personally I cant stand women who won't take a
drink with a man.

No your not a bit to blame Larry and did I ever say
you are? Even if I was cold sober I'd of gone just as fast out
to Lilah's backyard with you that night. How could you
guess I was a Virgin as I didn't once say no or try to stop
you a bit from dancing me out to the garden. Its true I laid
my own dizzy self down in those lilies and my body was a
pair of lips that drank all the stars from the sky.

O when I think of the lilies the pansies the daisies the
dandelions that tore and crushed under our pleasures that
year! For after that first night I was wild and let you
through the whole of spring and into summer so nowadays
I can hardly go across a field a grassy space in town without
feeling it shake under me like it remembers. Maybe if I'd
listened back then I'd of heard all those broken flowers and
the soiled earth shouting up about my sins. But how was I
supposed to hear with a regular Niagra of blood falling
down in my ears? O did I love you Larry so madly and said
and said and said and said and you said Sure you love me to
but men didn't make such a fuss about it as women did. To
talk of men and women, we nineteen.

Love was I happy til near the end of July when I felt
a coolness growing on you, just not the same craziness in
your carress and gone even those few very manly love
words. It made me sad alright maybe you noticed tho I did
what I could to hold in my grief while you were more and
more solemn or badtempered or restless and sometimes so
unusually brutal. Tho not over the flowers. There you
never were abandoned anymore until the very end. *But then!!!* O it began to be so awful at the very end the way

you drove at me like an enemy so I'd feel like I was waking up in the middle of the night with someone sticking a dagger in my heart. Til finally one August night when we lay in Nahano Park on the bank beside the gully you stopped amidst and sat back and cried wailed sobbed and I joined in with you I dont know why the way one infant bawls on account of another or one dog howls on account of another, all smeared out upon a selfsame agony so I didnt know where I ended or began. Then you jumped up suddenly and buttoned up and without a further word left me alone wailing in the grass there.

You did not call on me for two weeks, sixteen days to be exact.

I didn't think you were sick tho once just in case I phoned up your house maybe your mother told you. When she answered I says Is Larry there?

No she says, He's at work. Whose this?

But I hung up as I didn't want her to think I was chasing after you. So that was how I knew you weren't sick and I thought you were merely tired of me. It was all over I thought. And I will not tell you how I suffered those long and many days. But then on the seventeenth evening I walked out and there you were in front of the drugstore where I worked waiting to walk home with me.

How pale you looked and retched sick, saying not a word, only lifting your cap and taking my arm to lead me in the direction of home. It was so long before you spoke a word with me uncapable of saying boo cr good to see you again.

Halfways over you tell me Dolly what we have done is wrong.

The fires of rebuke suddenly like that out of your mouth! Did you remind me of it? Didn't I even know, having been as pure as Mary til some weeks before and having

let my flower fly without a care or thought? Well my heart repented alright you can be sure even if til then it didnt occur to me nothing did only this busting. Only felt my abdomin and pelvic parts swollen swollen til they was stuffed with all the blooms we laid on and could destroy me. How where was there room for remembering everything was wrong? til you said so. As you will recall I nodded too sick to speak. Then we had no other talk til we sat down on the damp bench near my house on the esplanade.

You looked faraway in the distance and says Dolly I love you. That is why what we have done is wrong.

My repenting heart sprang to be sure larry, it was so different from anyway you ever said it before, like a sermon. And at the same time, at that very exact moment I knew I was bearing a fruit of our love.

You continued But marriage is naturally out of the question. We ought not even to see each other in consideration of our wrong, you says. We will have to do this grajually. It was too much to fight against these passed two weeks.

I could cry now thinking how my heart broke then. But it all turned out alright at least that part did'nt it? So why am I sitting here bawling now like I was at the pictures? Look!!! A tear stain on this paper.

I says Yes Larry I understand so well how what you say is right.

Then up we get from the bench and arm in arm walk toward the stoop of my house, tho I am swinging 'gayly my heavy broken heart is eaten up. Then all at once you just got so angry out of nowhere and scared me I can tell you my god gracious. You yell Why O why O why did you go out with me to the garden, Lilah's garden, that first night?

To which I replied Didn't you want me to? I thought you did. O Larry because I loved you already then and there from the instant you walked in a regular man tho young and bully as a boy and I wouldn't of cared if you danced me over to a bed of nails let alone lilies, I fairly yelled.

You says meanly with your sweet mouth that was to sensitive to be mean you says Did you love a lot of others?

I knew perfectly well what you meant to say thou you knew I was pure before and then again after until the day we wed, you yourself remarked upon the blood. I says NO NO never another.

You says Sure but you would of gone on nails or spikes or hot coals if you just so happened to.

I replied and do and will always will NO! NO! there couldnt of been another other than you.

And after that we were cast out of our gardens of paradise and instead went on dates to movies or dances or parties like two every other young couple. And when you saw me home you kissed me with your lips closed except on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons with your tongue tasting of lemon drops and your hands so nervous on my twin hearts but only on the outside of my dress so I gave up wearing a brassiere the weekends which was'nt noticeable except when you squeezed as my cupcakes were swelling. For by the end of September I had to admit to myself that the fruit of our love was ripening apace and I knew soon I would have to make plans on account of living with my folks. But I didn't plan right away. I only ate very little and prayed.

O the unusual frost that came that year early and hard killing all the harvests but not mine, then went quick as it came with summer following again. So then when I thought it would be the end of us soon after I thought anyways we had a squeezed year together and all the seasons. That day

as you will well remember when summer came back, on the night of, we went to Nahano instead of the pictures the air being a treat and in Nahano the grass was grey.

I says as we sat near the bridge over the gully where the ancient Indian river is now a dry little black thing I says The summer is a big giant that got old and they thought he was dead so they buried him and now here is his grey head pushing out of the ground because he was'nt dead at all.

That is very lovely Dolly, you says and kissed me with your tongue althou it was a Wednesday. Then I almost died of fright when you put youre hand on my abdomen for I thought you'd feel The Child! ! ! But you said When we're married Dolly you will say lovely things all the time.

To imagine such a thing—I didnt expect it for a minute. Or maybe a little I did but not much. And I hoped then youd feel The Child but you didn't so I thought I would tell you then but decided Later on, not just then. How did it happen we went so wild all at once as in the beginning and I cried out My heavens I feel your birdie fluttering against my thigh.

You tell me with a load of pretty suffering in your lovely face you says He wants to be free.

And we freed him for a moment only but not to fly away but to set quietly in my palm its heart beating to beat the band. You will recall no doubt that this innocent thing brought all the evil into me again and I hollered aloud Put him put the birdie in his nest!

Instead you jerked away from me saying No we must not. We must wait until we are married.

But O there I had forgotten again all right and wrong and fought of you pleading It doesnt matter.

You shouted Yes Yes it does matter like anything for I want a Virgin in my wedding bed.

Not understanding I was without so much as a word and you said I will not have an impure woman for my wife not even if it was myself what violated her.

How I felt all chilled and frightened what did you mean I wondered.

I said But Larry.

You said to me whispering but angry so deturmined I could tell you says No buts. We must do things the right way. Hard as it is we must wait and you must remain a Virgin. We cannot sin before we are wed and believe me I'm thinking more of you than of myself. We must be married clean before the eyes of God.

What is there in the minds of men? A woman I can sometimes understand but not a man never a man not you Larry from first to last. There surely is a darkness in mens' minds connected out to things that aren't everyday, coming back into the world to say all the most very strange things. Sometimes frinstince on the radio the news anouncers voice comes out, the six pm ones, such a nice young man's voice like he just finished eating a peach in January. How happy I sit and listen at first about this and that war and flood coming so peachy off his tongue. Then all at once I can hear something in the back of his voice some news he isn't going to talk about.

I hear it.

If he says it I know I'll die for sure. My heart comes bouncing up in my throat while I listen tight up to him.

Then I hear him say This morning the prymminster of Suchasuch and my ears stop up. O I'm going to croak. He might say something plain frinstance and I think he is going to say my name, he is going to say, say, DOLORES to millions of listeners, no more than only Dolores and it wont be just my name but will be all connected up with that dark part of his mind that is connected out and out

and out among the smashing shooting stars!! Like it would be suddenly the voice of Our Lord hollering my name to everyone threewout the world. And floods and wars and all of it will be for real for very real come pouring great catastropheas THE WORLD WILL CROAK and I will croak out there upon the stars the peachy voice til I turn off the radio and try to quieten my ears my heart.

So after you proposed Larry the seasons became right again and my fruit ripened through that cold dry autum, hung up shut in my mind as it was in my uterus. I didn't tell you anything but only feared you might hear the creature grow. Feel it you wouldnt. See it you couldn't for I not only starved myself but wrapped my belly in scarves and later choked up my middle with laced up corsets. And I knew the child would be born dead. So through the fall we loved deeply and purely and I knew that when you had the devil you went driving it out in another. How? I knew. A woman knows. For you didn't want to soil me with so few months to wait and the wedding to be in May.

I had the infant in Febury, sooner than I expected. That morning at the drugstore the pains began and I told the boss I was gravely sick would he excuse me for the day? Thou I didn't have a plan in my head my prayers were answered truly and without a premeditated thought I bought a secondhand valise and a pile of old newspapers. Then I walked across town and rented a room with a bath at the Riviera Palace which now is down but was then the most elegant.

The child was a long time coming.

I sat in the tub until after nightfall all naked with a towel between my teeth to break the pain on for it hurt. At last he came My God and was attached! I never knew before they were attached. My horror Larry like a Siammeese twin I thought and to go my life with him connected to me.

Lord God it was the fittest punishment He could hope to inflinge upon my flaming soul. So first I tugged O I turn and shudder now remembering then I raised myself a little and took the drinking glass from the sink. I smashed it on the outside of the tub quickly like a jiffy cut him away from me. I must of fainted right away then as next I saw all over vomit and mud and blood and the child was making funny machiney noises. He was alive.

He was miserable being not altogether passed over so I ended his poor suffering by putting the towel on his face. Then he was still. He was a he I saw. I picked him up and put him to my breast. How wellmade he was I mean so perfect with all the little veins and the tiny fingers and that little cutie birdie. My God to make something so perfect like that and it being a waste. Imagine an automobile or a washing machine being all shaped up with all the little tiny cutie details so perfect and then all to waste. It couldnt be. And I thought What is he?

Here in this bathroom with me and my big milky tit in the face and the tub and the walls and the towel and all, for a minute before he died it was all alive in him, warm in him like it was in me. I was warm in him. Larry I felt my stomach unhinge. Me and that whole bathroom we werent alive anymore we were the cold outside. O didnt that thought hurt me. It had all been inside him and now was not. Is it that all to be dead Larry? That the outside isnt alive anymore?

When I laid him down again and crawled out the tub I cut my feet to pieces on the pieces of glass but didnt mind only wrapped the child in newspapers and put him in the suitcase with the pieces of glass. How weak as I was I washed out the tub and myself and the towel and the floor where I tracked blood from my feet.

I thought Now I'll go on home.

I thought My folks must be worried sick.

But you will understand I was so weak otherwise I would not of worried you as it turned out I did. For I lay down on the bed just to catch back my strength a minute and fell fast asleep only to wake in the midst of the night. The baby was crying from the suitcase!!! O never never did I hear such a terrible sound in my entire life except one other and of that to you dont know.

I said over and over to myself That I am too young to hear such a sound too young, for I was twenty only some weeks before. I am too young.

stopped up my ears with my fingers but heard it still til I put the pillows over my head and cried my own sweet self so that my own noises were louder and more important. I fell asleep again that way and when next I woke we were both still and it was still night. As I pulled myself out of the bed I felt like all hades had dropped right out of me, and thought O if you knew what I done while you believed me pure as snow tho really I was. I dressed and then shook the suitcase but no sound came so left the room and checked out of the hotel saying I have to catch a bus.

Will you forgive and pity me if I tell you I walked weak as I was back across town and went down the bank into the gully at Nahano in the pitch dark under the foot-bridge and pulled dragged scratched the pebbles stones, and rocks til it was 2 foot deep. Then put the suitcase in and thought noone will ever trouble about it thinking it a dog or cat for many poor beasts lay there in the gully just near the little black creek-trickle. Still I covered it all ~~up~~ well almost dead myself and my fingers feet and internalls aching and bruised. O at last then I got myself across the gully and up the other bank and dragged myself home to see the light on from outside and in you sitting worried with my folks.

Just then it flashed through my head to say I'd been

raped but I knew such a thing would kill you the very idea so evil. There's no end to my sins and you wanting everything to be perfect as it should so goodminded never suspecting anything awful of me.

After you all tell me Why Dolly you look retch'd sick what is wrong where have you been?

I says to you That I got sick at work.

Yes says Mama, Larry went to see your boss.

So I tell her It was on account of him, the boss I mean, that it happened. I had a little headache at the store and he gave me a powder but got the powders mixed up. I saw afterwards that he made a mistake and gave me a mild poison! Then I ran to the hospital and they cleaned me out and let me go in the evening but on the way home I fainted in Nahano. In the freezing cold noone passed or saw me but now I'm fine alright all better and you better not call the doctor for youll only get my boss in trouble. I had a hard time lying to them at the hospital so they wouldn't know.

Mama said Alright no doctor.

And Papa said Larry you better call the police again and say she was out with a girlfriend. The cops were looking for you all night Dolly.

But then after everything was fine and how sweet you were to stay and care for me the whole next two days while I was in bed, not going to work yourself, and how I made you touch my soft belly just once, just like you used to tho it was still somewhat swollen.

May came. My God there in the photo how happy I look looking so little in those tons of white chiffon and lace like an actress sitting in a bubble bath. You look happy too Larry and you were werent you? and it was true you took a Virgin to your weding bed. Only what happened I don't know. Maybe a woman who isnt a man's wife is more interesting like I was before. Maybe they smell different. I

dont know but I knew already then before the first year of our marraig was over that you were carrying on first with one then with another. How? I just knew thats all in your carress maybe which seemed as ever loving and not the same maybe like the spurt of a man that would'nt poureth forth seed. Did I ever blame you? And don't think I'm bitter because it was my just punishment for even if I didn't do wrong I did too.

O let me say it quick!

She came. *There!*

She came and said Are you Dolores, Larry's Dolores?

There that's put down at long last. Then it was we'd been married a year and a half and settled into a quiet way not yet being able to afford children but everything going a normal fashion with my knowing secretly of the other. Then in the morning while you were away at work came the knock at the front door and I saw this middleage distinguished lady standing there.

You don't know who I am, she says But I know Larry.

I smiled very kindly being twenty years younger than her at the least and anyways liking her right off I says Yes maybe I do know who you are. Wont you step inside?

In she comes and sits down in the parlor. Then to make things plain I opened the box of chocolates and looking down says You are the woman that Larry.

Good heavens, she says shaking her head, No no you are mixing me up with my sister.

O it is your sister, I says sitting down I says Could I ask you why you are calling on me?

She says My sister has had a child.

Well I got so dizzy then I tell you expecting God knows what out of her mouth.

She says It is Larry's child.

I believed it alright without a doubt, she was plain to

see an honest woman and I expected the same was true for her sister. Well what could I do Larry if they had our child instead of us? But so as she wouldn't think I wasnt loyal to you I argued a little saying It was impossible.

Yes my dear, Miss Portingal said, I expected you to doubt. I haven't come to you for blackmail purposes but only to tell you that my beloved sister is dying. Larry has not seen her in months and does'nt know of the child. By profession I am a school teacher and can't possibly care for him and there is noone else but a married brother who could not possibly.

I saw what she wanted and I thought of that poor child and I interrupted her No please let me have him. How old is he?

She says That he was only born two days before.

So I combed my hair and put on my coat for it was cool though only October and went with Miss Portingal. And behold there was Calvin red as Russia in a basket in the kitchen for as you well know there was only the other room and in that one lay Myrtle. But thou red as he was how lovely he looked, a strong little rose and broke my heart he was so much like the other.

I said Could I see your sister?

Miss Portingal seemed surprised She is unconschious.

Just I says to take a peek.

So she opened the kitchen door and I looked through. O Larry how bad off she was! She was'nt beautiful maybe she was before the child tho you werent ever much for a face only but she looked tempting alright even thin and dark as a black olive gone grey as she was. Tempting and furtile.

Miss Portingal says I am old enough to be my Myrtle's mother.

To be polite I shook my head You wouldn't think so at all.

But she gave me such an angry look You would if you'd seen her before this tragedy. Maybe I raised her in a bad way. She was always a wild girl and her love for Larry brought her here at last to Calvary. She is only twenty years old.

So that is where he comes from Larry and that's why I wanted to call him Calvin after Calvary for Myrtle's sake may you and her rest in the peaceful arms of the Lord. Amen!!

She closed the kitchen door saying What about adoption formalities.

I says No I'll just take him, it's better Larry doesn't know.

But she says My dear how will you explain to him and to the authorities?

I told her Never mind That I'll find the right words at the right time.

Before I left I says Did you tell me that Larry doesn't see Myrtle anymore?

She says Yes he hasn't seen her for months she says. They fought I don't know what about. Maybe she tried to make him jealous. That is her way.

As I took up the basket Miss Portingal gave me the formulas and diapers then kissed Calvin and my own self and says with wet eyes God bless you both, all three, good-bye.

Tho I saw her again four days later and from her mouth came the worst thing I ever heard in my life except the baby crying out of the valise. Well then after I left the Portingals I rode in a taxi to Nahano Park then stepped out and paid and walked over the Park then down into the

gully tho it was bright noon. But noone to be seen. I went over to that very spot under the bridge where the other child lay and I put Calvin, the basket of with him in it, on the gravel and stones, then put a few little stones near his face and heart. I prayed may God Omighty give me back the soul of the other. I took the stones out of the basket and went on home.

Weren't you surprised thou when you got back from work? I never saw such a face on you before or after.

You says Where the hell does this come from?

I says From the good Lord.

Then I told you how I went walking in the fresh air over the footbridge and there saw underneath a woman leaving a basket there. When I called her What are you doing there? she looked up at me in fright and says What can I do? I have no family and am going to die very soon.

So I went down to her and indeed she was frail and delicate, dried up like an old olive tho so young.

I says But just the same you cant do that leave him here like that.

She says If you make me take him away I'll put him somewhere else. God isn't there someone who will raise and love this child? When I die what will become of him anyways?

O did I ever believe you could be in such a rage Larry my heavens!

What the damn hell you think we're running an orphan asylum? You shouted Raise another man's bastard? Some idea?

Larry Larry no, I says He's not a bastard, she wore a ring on her finger and was all in black and told me her husband had passed away.

Well til I calmed you down as you will recall was no easy work. But then you fed him a bottle and learned to

love him a little and so that was that, our child returned and we kept him. Calvin.

But Miss Portingal came a second time bearing ill tidings. It made me nervous I can tell you to see her for I hoped she wouldnt become a regular caller and drop in while you were home one day. But she was in mourning so I knew that Myrtle had gone.

I says Can I get you anything to drink a cup of tea maybe or excuse me something stronger. Because I could see her sorrow was deep.

No she says, Listen to me Dolores. Myrtle was buried today. For all her wildness she was based on a good girl. And I am an honest woman.

O dont I know that Miss Portingal I says in tears for her and poor Myrtle.

Please don't interupt me my dear. My story is a difficult one to tell. The day you took the child Myrtle came to herself for a while before the end and she asked me where was the baby and who would look after him when she was gone.

I told her Do'nt be afraid my precious he will be well cared for. I've given him to Larrys' wife.

Myrtle wept like an infant for a long time and before the end came she says Alice, Alice I have lied to you. It is not Larry's child.

I neednt tell you of my shock Dolores. She said no more and didn't give an explanation. She merely repeated it several times He is not Larry's child.

O love Larry if I didn't see plain black and not from Miss Portingal's dress.

She continued Who is the father Dolores I have no idea. For three days now I have been in conflicts with myself as to what I must do. But in all rightiousness I felt

bound in duty to tell you what I heard with my own ears. Naturally if you want to return the child you will be justified in doing so. What I will do with him I cant myself think. God knows.

So she talked on like that and I didn't know what to wonder except no I could never whoever made him part with Calvin.

Miss Portingal says You dont of course have to decide right away.

I told her No No Miss Portingal he is my child. And I cried like a baby. He is mine. He is ours.

Now that you know the facts, Miss Portingal says My heart and mind are clear. It is your decision.

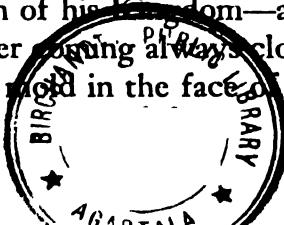
Then she asked to see Calvin one last time and kissed him again but didn't kiss me now. She left saying You are a good woman. Larry is a most fortunate man. It is a lucky child that has you for its mother.

As I Was Going Up the Stair

Between the ages of seven and ten I ran away three times: on account of Henry IV, God and the Politicians.

Henry IV was bad and when I told my mother so, she agreed and said she wanted only to protect me from him. But sometimes I felt she was on his side, for in a rage she might shout: "Wait until Henry hears what you've done, David. Just you wait. It'll be the tower for sure—full of mildew and cockroaches!" And how could he hear unless mamma told him, since he was on the backside of the world in a dirty dark town called London?

Henry IV—when he could catch them—locked little boys in black towers for the most sudden reasons: for smashing the china, for coming late to supper, for putting an oil lamp on the head of a snowman my father had built, for making myself vomit a half-dozen chocolates forced upon me by Aunt Leona whom I hated. In the morning (even if I'd done wrong the night before) Henry was easy to sneer at, and during the day I would hardly think of him at all. But with twilight, whether I'd been good or bad, I'd begin to feel the stretch of his Kingdom—and by night he was there, his dark tower ~~going always~~ closer, black stone walls draped with blue mists in the face of a King. Listen-



ing to the hum of cockroach legs and to the groaning of trapped little boys and to the noises from the road before our house, it would sometimes take me half the night to fall asleep. I would lie facing the wall, my eyes so tightly shut they rolled backwards, my shoulders hunched, my neck bristling in fear of the touch of cold foreign fingers. But he didn't get me until Christmas Eve.

That night, because I thought I heard Santa Claus, I left my bed and went downstairs to look into the parlor. There it was dark but for a big tree, starry and silver as a country sky, in the middle of the room; and underneath sat my parents, tying ribbon in the dimness. Seeing it all, I was so weak I couldn't help myself.

"David!" my mother shrieked. "What are you doing?"

I was taken to my room and put into fresh pajamas while mamma spoke of my crimes. "To do such a thing!" she exclaimed. "And right on the floor at your age! Well, if Henry doesn't get you tonight, *I'll* be the most amazed."

"He won't," I said.

"See if he won't. Now get into bed." And she covered me up.

"Stay with me a while, mamma, please."

She turned off the lamp. "You get straight to sleep. My floor will be a mess if I don't see to it right away. Now go to sleep."

"I'm afraid," I confessed.

"Afraid of what, for heaven's sake?" she said, closing the door after her.

The traffic never stopped that night. The wind against my window shook the house, threatened to break the glass, and the sound of hooves on the road didn't belong to Santa Claus's reindeer but to the stallions that drew Henry's coach. I lay stiff with fear until just before dawn; then,

loosening my limbs, I moved from the bed, crept down the staircase and went out the door, leaving it open behind me. Without waiting to look round, I ran through the ice-white streets in my pajamas, my bare feet tearing on the frozen pavement. I ran across the town watching in the dark for a place to hide. |

There were soft sounds behind me and I shut my eyes to race even faster: but the royal footsteps followed swiftly as I went. I screamed to feel his arms go out, tug at the back of my pajamas, claw at me until so weakened I let myself yield across an ocean to the garbage streets of London.

I don't know who saved me, but someone must have swept me back over the Atlantic since on Christmas morning I was in bed and my parents were sitting beside me. After they had petted and kissed me, they asked why I'd run away.

"Because he was after me. I tried to escape, but he got me anyway."

"Who?" my father asked.

"Henry IV."

"You know that isn't true," said my mother gently.

"Yes, it is," I insisted, surprised at her. "He took me to London and threw me in the tower. But I guess I fainted because I can't remember who rescued me."

They looked at each other, and papa put his hands on his knees before standing up to go to the window where he muttered and stared outside.

"Tell us the truth, David," mamma said. "You won't be punished. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. And I'm telling you the truth." I sat up and pressed myself close to her.

"My baby, it wasn't Henry and you know it."

"But it was." I nodded my head repeatedly; I couldn't understand her disbelief.

“No, David. On Christmas Eve, Henry IV is very busy—”

“Stop it, Edna,” my father said, quietly but angrily, and he turned to me. “David, there is no Henry IV. Do you follow that? There is no such person, so naturally he couldn’t have kidnapped you. Now tell me—”

“There is no . . .” I said, uncertain what the phrase meant. Mamma moved her eyes round my face, not knowing where to rest them.

“No, there is no Henry IV,” papa said again.

“But there is!” I slid out of bed. “There is because he took me away to London and locked me in the tower.” Running across the landing, I went into the bathroom and locked the door. There, sitting in the empty tub, my heart and brains pounded with confusion. But after a while I calmed down and passed the time by squeezing my toes into the faucets.

I forgot about Henry until mamma came to the bathroom door and told me of our Christmas tree and what we would have for dinner.

“Please come out, darling,” she said.

“Do you believe me?

“No, because—”

“I won’t come out.”

“Listen to me, David . . .”

“No, there *is* a Henry! And he took me away.” I put my fingers in my ears, pretending not to listen, but I heard her when she spoke.

“It couldn’t have been Henry who kidnapped you because he was sent into exile a few days ago. I just saw it in the newspapers: he’s far away, on an island, all alone, and he can’t bother anyone ever again. And the new King is a nice man—he’s only a boy himself.”

I was silent and she began to plead: “Please come for

lunch, David. It doesn't matter whether you've told the truth or whether there is or isn't a Henry. Does it matter, baby?" Her voice had gone so low I believed she was afraid papa might hear her. I felt a pang of sadness and pity for her, so I climbed from the tub and opened the door. Her eyes were full of tears when she bent to take me in her arms. "Don't think about it now, David. It's so much more important to be jolly and have your Christmas dinner. There isn't anymore Henry IV. There's a new King called David—just like you—and he's so nice . . . so very nice . . ."

But God was not so nice. The loving child He had been grew as I grew taller, and He ceased to be festive, became bearded and grim. He forgot about the old things like sun and weather and birds and the countryside, and instead He began to watch. There was no need for my mother or anyone to tell Him about me, for He knew all: He could look through walls and the top of my head; He could hear the unspoken word, sense the uncommitted act.

"Is He watching me now?" I asked mamma one clouded morning as we went up the street to shop.

"Is who watching you?"

"God."

She laughed and put her arm around my shoulder. "Of course He is. He's always watching us." Her voice was very gentle with a special sad tone that made me think she was quite pleased to have Him nosying around.

"And He'll never stop?"

"Never!" she said grandly.

Putting my hands behind my back, I walked on in silence, staring up into the clouds, planning ways to get rid of Him.

After that, whenever I could, I spited Him with the things He had once loved best: I squashed His life out of

caterpillars, pullcd His legs from the ants, tore His eyes out of sparrows and robins, shredded His beauty off a rose. He knew I did these things, for He knew all; but I couldn't make Him go away. He said nothing and didn't try to frighten me, but He just looked until I thought my head was glass and would shatter from his gaze.

Once, the screams of a blinded robin brought mamma to the back of the house where I sat on the ground enclosed by a clutch of maple trees. Ten feet away from me the bird shrieked, jumped spastically, fluttered its wings and hit the trunk of a tree. It lay still a moment and I wondered if it could see its own eyes hanging along the sides of its head. Then it began to move again like a useless crying fluttering heart.

"David!" my mother gasped. "That bird. That poor bird."

"Do you think God is feeling bad?" I asked, and she went to the robin, caught it under her shoe and crushed it.

"How awful." She was shuddering. "How did it happen? Why did you sit there and let it suffer so?"

"Do you think God is feeling bad?"

"Of course He is," she said impatiently.

"Then maybe He'll stop watching me." I drew my knees up to my chin.

Her eyes were wide with shock when she spoke. "David, you didn't do that to the robin, did you? You didn't!"

I said nothing.

"It would have been a terribly cruel thing to do, inhuman. You know that, don't you?"

"If I'd done it, would God stop watching me?"

"He'd make you suffer. He'd make you sick and full of aches and pains. He'd certainly make you die."

"But would He stop *watching* me?"

"No!" she almost screamed. "No and no. I don't understand you, David. My own sweet child, I don't understand you." And shaking her head, her face set in an expression I couldn't identify, she tore from the shadows and ran back to the house.

I sat on under the trees and when the sun was high and pieces of it broke through the leaves above my head, I realized that mamma hadn't called me for lunch, and I hated her for being on everyone's side but mine. It was because of this that I remembered Henry IV and how he had gone out of my life.

That afternoon, not having had my lunch, I ran away, but the further I went and the faster I ran, the closer He seemed to watch me. O where was God not? To run from Him was like running from my own legs, and I looked down the length of my body at the impossibility of escape. I paused to lie down on the earth and feel its coolness come up to me, lifting me to forgetfulness. When I awoke the ground was like ice and the night air needled me. I lifted myself and started home because I was hungry and wanted to sleep.

At the edge of town I passed a church and, remembering God, I went inside. There was no one about, so I walked to the altar and kneeled, praying until my knees burned: "O please leave me alone. It's so awful having You always there. Go away. Let me be." I prayed and I begged, weakly, sleepily, while I yawned, while my legs ached.

The sensation of lightness was sudden and moved through me quickly as if the floor had been pulled away. With feeble, peaceful curiosity, I peered around into the dark little coves, into the grey ones, into those where long thin candles burned at the knees of statues. Everything looked so nice, so pure, that my eyes felt clear and my body floated with increasing lightness. Everything was somehow

fresh—emptied of God's insistent stare. I knew, *I knew*, that He had gone away, and I stood up and left the church and walked through the wonderful empty blue night. The sky hung and stars burned and the earth sang without God.

Papa opened the door.

"It's after midnight," he said, his face moving rapidly from surprise to relief to pale stony rage. "Where have you been?"

Before I could answer, my mother came running into the hall. "David, O David. We were frantic. Where were you? Was it all because of that silly robin? O David! You haven't eaten all day." Abruptly, her lips and jaw became tight, and the flesh hardened on her neck. "How dare you stay out until this hour? Where have you been?"

"I ran away from God," I said quietly. "But it's all right now because He isn't here any more."

"What are you talking about?" asked papa. He took my arm and led me into the parlor.

"I'll get him something to eat," mamma muttered and left the room.

"Now, tell me where you were, David," he said.

"I went to the country and then I went to church. But it's all right now," I reassured him, putting my arms around his neck. "God's gone away. Isn't it wonderful?"

Patting my back stiffly, he freed himself and we sat in silence until mamma came back with sandwiches and milk. The food looked good and so did they, my parents, and even the room and the old house and everything. I drank the milk down right away.

Then papa told her what I'd said.

"What do you mean: God's gone away?" she asked.

"There's no more God. Like there's no more Henry IV."

I ate my sandwiches and drank another glass of milk; then they sent me to bed where, unwatched, I slept deeply and peacefully. But in the morning, at breakfast, they told me that God hadn't gone away at all.

"But I know He has," I said confidently.

"How do you know?" asked mamma.

"Because I know. Because He isn't watching me any more. He isn't *in* anything any more."

"But He *is* watching you, darling. And you must be grateful for that."

Her voice sounded as if all it was going to tell me had been prepared in advance, and so, firmly, I said: "No! He's gone away."

"He hasn't!" my father announced. "And you mustn't even think such a thing."

The tears began to hurt my eyes and I banged my fist hard on the table. "He *has*. He *has*. He's gone away. *O please . . .*" I begged. "I know He's gone."

Mamma's head shook rapidly. She was pale, very pale, and pressed her fingertips to her temples. "No, David. You can't get rid of God. But if you're very good maybe He won't watch you so much. You must trust in His goodness. It's the only way."

We didn't talk about it any more after that, but nonetheless I was sorry I'd come home. And although I knew He'd gone away I had to use all my strength not to notice Him watching from the heart of an artichoke, from the unexpected eyes of the scrubwoman.

He became easier to ignore when the Politicians arrived.

There were three of them, and my father introduced them to me as Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones, Mr. Brown. Later on, he called Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones; Mr. Jones, Mr. Black; and

Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith. Truly they were interchangeable, sweating and grunting under too many clothes, breaking into rough windy laughter that ended with shots of phlegm rolling yellowly on their tongues, bowing and jerking and making painted-looking faces like marionettes. At first, when I thought they were only funny living dolls, I would surprise them with a scream or an outlandish attack to see if they might move like people or break their faces into a new unknown expression—and once or twice I succeeded. But then afterwards I couldn't surprise them any more, and they had three or four faces for everything I did: they would guffaw or unlock their eyes or throw up their hands or take a heavy jump backward, depending on what they thought I expected.

Through almost all the thick-smelling nights of one spring their voices came up to me from the garden below my bedroom window. I wasn't curious about their business until I realized they were putting stories together, in pieces and patches, as if snipping episodes from lives. Once I even thought I heard a pair of scissors going, and I ran to the window to look down, half-expecting to see a life being ripped open at the seams. But it was only my mother, at a little distance from the men, cutting a dress pattern.

I didn't really mind the Politicians since I knew they came to help my father, but when I saw their witchcraft working I felt they menaced me. For one night, I heard them tell a story about how my father was brutally beaten, kicked in the head by a band of men the Politicians didn't like.

“It happened tonight,” said Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones, “as there's no moon.”

“Between nine and ten o'clock,” said Mr. Jones or Mr. Black. “What time is it now?”

Lifting the watch from his waistcoat pocket, my fa-

ther told them: "It's a quarter to ten." And he began to laugh. "You know, my head is actually starting to ache."

The Politicians roared; even my mother giggled.

But from where I stood, my father looked perfectly well, and I lay down on my bed trying to figure out what they could mean.

In the morning, at breakfast, papa had a clean wide bandage around his head, and he read aloud from the newspaper a story about how he had been attacked the night before. Not only had he been pounded and kicked, but one of the attackers had cut papa's leg with a knife. Unable to eat, I sat listening, my eyes moving from my father's hands to his mouth to the bandage; and I began to be afraid because I knew there was something wrong and the world seemed very strange.

"I don't understand," I began and, trying to put confusion into sounds, I caught myself stammering.

"What don't you understand?" mamma asked, giving my father a nervous look.

But I said nothing else. That night I stood hidden with my horror at the window above the garden while the three jolly demons, the three laughing wizards, filed into their chairs and commenced to alter life. I looked out at the spring night and was dazzled by its reality, by the black leaves on the trees, the black lawn that would be warm green in the morning. Could then those three men talk winter into being?

I trusted nothing that spring, for the Politicians seeped into every minute of my day. Sometimes, catching sight of a vase or a chair or my own reflection in the mirror, I would stop so stiff the back of my neck would crack while I waited for what I saw to become something else. And although it didn't change, I would move away with slow uncertain relief as if balancing the object, the person, my

own image, on my head. What did my parents know, I asked myself, and watched them suspiciously. They knew hidden things; they could do what I couldn't even phrase. And while nothing happened after my father's beating, I became frantic with doubts, hardened out of terror—and I faced my mother when we were alone at lunch.

“What is it?” I asked, and when she looked at me, I stabbed the fork into my chop.

“You know very well what it is,” she replied and continued eating.

“And nothing else?” I was shivering.

“Heavens, David, you said not three minutes ago that you didn’t want the beans.”

My arm was stretched out before me, holding the fork that held the chop tight against the plate; I watched for a sign of danger. “Can this be anything but a chop?”

She acted as if what I said were strange to her. “Baby, you *eat* chops. You don’t talk about them.”

“But maybe you can make it into something else.”

Leaning over to my side of the table, she put her hand on my forehead, but I jerked away, tossing my head.

“Or maybe you’ve just got a touch of spring fever,” she said severely. I could see the deceit heaving in her chest and I made my eyes hard and cold.

“Is it spring now?”

“Well, what do you think? Honestly, David, I don’t—”

“If you say it’s winter, will it be winter?”

Her face was all twisted up, pretending surprise. “As if a word ever made anything happen!” she exclaimed.

“Then say it. Say it’s winter,” I ordered and turned my eyes to the window. I could hardly breathe as I waited for her to speak.

Her sigh was full of exasperation, but she said: “It’s

winter. There, there you are! Did you ever see a greener winter?"

But I had shut my eyes against her words and when, at length, I opened them and saw the unchanged garden, I felt only a curious pleasure at having tricked my mother into something. I asked: "And if a thing isn't real, you can't make it so by saying so?"

"No, of course you can't! And you're going to go hungry if you believe you can talk that chop down your throat."

Later, when the Politicians came into our garden, I stood leaning across my window sill, holding mamma's words as witnesses—not because I thought them true, but because they had been said, issued into the air. So while the chairs were drawn together over the flagstone and the conversation began, I loosened my excited jaw and looked down fiercely.

"NO!"

I screamed it. And then again:

"NO!"

My voice hammered against the trees and through the garden and across the town, went sounding out to the hills and the ocean, loomed so large upon the world that I had to pause and listen to it myself.

Below, the four men gazed up at me as did my mother sitting at her distance.

"No," I hollered again. "It's all lies. You're liars"—my father had left his seat and gone into the house—"and it's spring no matter what you say. Even if they kicked papa's head in, it didn't happen. And if they cut his leg, it didn't happen, and you can say from now till doomsday, but there won't be so much as a scratch on—"

I was sucked back from the window, spun around to face the enormous figure of my father. His hand came down rapidly on my cheek and with such force that I felt

the pain from inside out, from deep in the midst of my brains.

“How dare you!” he roared. “How dare you call them liars!”.

“Because they are—and you too.”

Down again came the hand, lashing out full upon my face. “Get to that window and apologize at once.”

I stood without moving because I hated him too much to obey, and yet I was afraid to say once more that the Politicians lied. When he hit me again, every muscle in my body was unstrung and I could feel wild crooked smiles sliding over my face.

“Get to that window! Do you hear? I’ll wipe that smile off your face.”

He tried to beat it off, but it rolled from under his hands like quicksilver: it was the only part of me that moved.

“Get to that window or I’ll kill you.” I’d never seen him so wild before: his eyes were swollen and enflamed, his blondish-silver hair stood up like hair on a cat’s tail, and he could hardly speak for the clench of his teeth. During a moment of pause when he looked agonized while breath snored down his chest, I made a short broken laugh and strutted crazily to the window.

“Mr. Black, Mr. Blue, Mr. Yellow,” I called hoarsely and laughed. “I apologize, I apologize, I apologize.”

“Perfectly all right . . . Just a kid . . . It’s a joke . . . Sure, it was just a joke . . .”

My father had gone to the door. “You’ll pay for this fully in the morning—”

“Mamma said they lied!” I screamed. “She told me that they lied.”

“Take off your things and get into bed. I don’t want another word out of you.”

I waited numb beside the window until I heard his

voice in the garden, laughing lightly with the others, and then I dropped to the bed and cried from the walls of my chest. When I realized how loud my sobs were I pushed a corner of the pillow into my mouth and bit hard so that I wouldn't have to share my pain. I cried because I was myself and because the world was shut in mystery for me: I would always be alone and unknowing—and life would never end.

My sobs soon became the loudest things on earth and I had to carry them away. Holding the pillow at my mouth, I left the bed, went downstairs and out of the house. I knew right away that I wanted to go toward the thunder of the sea, and so, leaving the town, I turned south. Later, when the night grew cold and wet along the country road, I found I wasn't crying any more, so I took the pillow from my face and put it under my arm—for if I reached the sea, I would want to rest my head and sleep forever on the shore.

But this didn't happen.

They found me at dawn. "I'm not going back," I said and continued walking.

They held my arms and legs, and the pillow was taken from me. I knew then it was useless, so I stopped struggling and let them bring me home. But I said nothing: I didn't speak for three days, not even to ask where the Politicians had gone.

On the fourth day my mother came into my room and made her voice all trembly with sweetness. She asked me why I complicated everything.

"Why can't you be like other children? You must try to be nicer, David. We only want the best for you, you know that. You must trust our goodness. Papa and I have lived much longer than you, and we know better. Just be happy and play your games and don't think about things.

We're here to think about everything for you." She went on to tell me I was too young to understand such things as business being business and concern for my education and the comforts of life, and that I just must trust in everybody's goodness and wisdom.

"Then is it true a thing is real because you say so?" I asked, speaking my first words to her.

· "Wait until you're older, my baby. Don't think about it now."

And because I was a child, and it was possible to divert myself, I did as mamma said, and life was agreeable for some time afterward. But when I was twelve, it happened that I thought again—and nearly died of it.

Being old enough to sit still and swallow boredom for an hour or two, I was sometimes brought into the parlor to share my parents' pleasure in their guests, and I found how easy it was to deceive others into believing I was really there. From somewhere 'faraway, I would send my smile and a few words to tea, and they would greet the visitors and seat themselves politely in a corner—without anyone noticing that I myself had not appeared. Nor did the company realize that at times my voice stood up without me in the center of the room and recited the poem or the soliloquy my mother had poured into it before the guests arrived. Sometimes, while reciting, I'd become so fascinated with the ~~deception~~ that I'd find my ear had come into the room to listen to my flat mechanical voice and mamma's excited whisper: "No, I tell you. No, he just remembers them because he loves them so. And you can certainly see for yourself what a born little actor he is!"

So, having learned to divide myself in the parlor, I

succeeded in doing it all over the house. And no one ever knew. But one afternoon everything ended because Mrs. Simmons unexpectedly brought me a gift.

She was the oldest of all our visitors, and the nicest, since she hardly ever spoke to me and never pretended to care that I was present. When I recited poetry she either hummed or talked, and occasionally to my delight she left the room. Mamma told me not to grieve about this because Mrs. Simmons was too old to be interested in anyone but herself and that the only reason we had her to tea was that her dead daughter had been mamma's best friend.

The afternoon Mrs. Simmons brought me the book, she arrived late, after everybody had begun to believe she wasn't coming. No one cared; in fact there was general relief at the "old crank's" absence. I felt sorry that they talked this way about her, and when at last she did appear—and with a gift for me besides—I was so moved by gratitude and pity that I decided I would spite the others by bringing all of me into the parlor to thank the old lady.

My eyes arrived, and then my ears; the rest of my senses rushed over me, causing shocks and shivers along my skin as when someone walks over your grave. And then my legs were there, my teeth and tongue, my arms, my fingertips, my hair—and though more and more of me appeared I began to worry. For loaded as I was upon myself I still hadn't come into the room.

"Well, David, don't you think Mrs. Simmons deserves a thank-you for the nice book she's brought?" my mother asked me.

"O yes," I said, disturbed. "Thank you." Aware of my failure to present myself, I moved away, ignoring mamma's comments on how bad my manners were.

As I sat down, I prayed I would come into the room. Where had I been those other afternoons when I'd sent

pieces off? I couldn't remember, and in panic I added more pieces to myself: my hatred of chocolate ice cream, the soft fuzz of my upper lip, my memories of Henry IV, God and the Politicians, every sin I had committed, the names of all my teachers, the ABC, the times table, my opinion of the moon, the color of my eyes—and then I stopped. For to my horror I saw that the way I looked and what I did and had and all I knew and thought and felt didn't make me real. I wasn't in the room, no, and I wasn't going to come into the room, and as far as I knew I had never been anywhere!

Everything swayed then and my fingers gripped the sides of the chair; my eyes reached across the parlor for help, for someone to notice me and say I was there, but instead the floor swung out from under me. There were no people anywhere.

Around me they moved, they faced one another and talked; they expressed laughter and sadness; they pretended sympathy; they drank or smoked or chewed a biscuit or touched hands; they had blonde hair or brown or red or grey; they had clothes, faces, feet, bodies. They did as people seemed to do, and had as people seemed to have—but I knew with absolute certainty that they were only the doing and the having: they weren't the people. I and those that sat before me were not even hypocrites—we were ghosts. *And where were the people? Where? Where?*

My mother's voice asked me to recite and I went to the middle of the room where I stood petrified, as if ordered into a haunted house. There was my mother, and looking at her, I was miserable with wondering whether I had ever met her. Had I ever met, loved, kissed, hated, trusted or mistrusted, run to or away from, anything but her ghost? And if not, O God, where was she, my mother, now sitting opposite me?

Mistaking what she saw in my face for a lapse in memory, Mamma prompted: “‘Lift not the painted veil,’ David!” But my voice was emptied of the sonnet, and wordless I looked round to question why, whatever for? After a long staring silence, indifferent to their embarrassment, I said: “We’re all like that. all of us.” And although I was only saying what I knew, once spoken, I somehow expected we would all understand, and the people would swoop down and join with me in tremendous laughter at our ghosts.

But their ghosts became more insistent: blushing and twitching, coughing and scratching, with eyes gone suddenly dead.

Immediately afterwards, I was excused from the parlor and sent up to my room. Sitting down opposite the mirror, I looked at the boy and moved my arm and shook my head. “‘Lift not the painted veil,’” I said, watching my lips, knowing all the time that I was no more real than he in the looking-glass.

I was never again asked to recite poetry, and although I continued going to the parlor, it was to look and to wonder while a pain thickened in my chest. Observing the others, I began to feel that the more they moved or spoke, the more clothes they wore, the more insistent was their ghostliness. So I tried to train myself to sit motionless, to speak seldom and only when necessary, never to smile or laugh or cry, never to move my eyes, almost never to breathe. And I would watch myself, mistrustful of my presence.

The pain grew in my chest, and my wondering sorrow continued. It hurt me to breathe and to be curious.

I’d always believed our guests hadn’t cared for me, but now I felt they liked me even less. They thought me a

strange boy and said so right out loud; sometimes in front of me. But I didn't mind, for I knew their ghosts were speaking of mine: They told my mother I must have friends and whispered that I had no personality and would grow up to be dull and to lead a lonely life. And suddenly some of our visitors started bringing their boys and girls along to tea. Under pressure, I occasionally played with the others, though when I did I knew I was yielding to my ghosthood, and that though I might seem to be there altogether, I wasn't there at all. I could hear vaguely, from far away, my self calling to my ghost. I would stop to listen, stand still, try to detect the direction of the call.

Once, Mrs. Simmons brought her granddaughter Anita to our house. I had never seen her before, and I noticed that though she was no more than ten years old, her chest was as full as a woman's. Other children were there as well, but Anita said nothing to them or to the grownups. She sat as I always sat, absolutely still, eyes fixed on her lap, hands folded. Her face never changed, not even when she accepted a piece of cake and said thank you. I thought her nearly ghostless. When the children began to play hide-and-seek, Anita and I were encouraged to join them. How mournfully she played, like a sad mechanical doll wound into the game, and I watched her closely, feeling more and more a new excitement, the thrill of potential presence. At one point in the game, Anita ran to hide behind the big brown velvet drape in the dining room, but before she disappeared our eyes met, and I felt recognition between us. I followed her behind the drape where she stood all in brown shadows.

“Are you a person, Anita?” I asked.

She slammed her arms across her chest and started crying. “No no. I'm a little girl. I'm only in the fifth grade.”

I shook my head. “That's not what I mean. I mean,

everyone here—they aren't here. They're not real. They're only ghosts."

Her eyes blew wide at my words and she pushed past me and ran from the dining room screaming that I'd tried to touch her chest. When I came into the parlor, the company of spooks rose against me, mighty with their ghostliness.

Later on, my father beat me, but I didn't care. For even as he struck, I knew he was pretending; I knew he was involved in some complicated lie that I didn't understand, that probably he didn't understand, but which made it necessary that his ghost beat mine, that his voice bellow into my ears the incomprehensible code I had broken by touching or not touching Anita's bumps, by vilifying purity with the desires of my fingertips. So I submitted to the cleansing force of papa's hand, made no sound, felt nothing but the pain in my chest which was hot and throbbing, more alive than I.

During the following days, as the ache increased, my curiosity grew slighter and less coherent, simmering over a fever. It hardly mattered any more that there were ghosts or where the people were. It was another of life's impossibilities, like God's eyes or being eternally David, and my growing illness made it unimportant.

One night I woke from sleep to find my mother at my bedside.

"You were groaning," she said. "Aren't you feeling well?"

Half-asleep, I mumbled, "Mamma, why are we all ghosts?"

"You're dreaming, David. Hush, go back to sleep."

"Where are the people? Why do they only send their ghosts?" I sat up through the darkness and shivered with fever and chill.

“Who send their ghosts?” she whispered, pushing me down under the covers. “You’re so feverish, my baby. I think we’d better have the doctor in the morning.”

“Will he send his ghost?” I asked.

“You must have been having a nightmare. Try to sleep now.”

“No. The people who come here—you and papa, me—who are we? Where are we? Why do we send only ghosts?”

“But we don’t send ghosts. There are no such things as ghosts, my dear darling baby. You mustn’t be afraid. How hot your head is!” She stroked her hand across my forehead. Though the room was dark I could see her face was drawn, the hollows filled with shadow and running with tears.

“We act like people, but the people aren’t here. They’re somewhere else.”

She pretended to smile, giving me patience and gentleness. “If we act like people, it’s because we *are* people. And if we’re here, how can we be anywhere else? You know I’m here to take care of you.”

After a while, believing me to be asleep, she left the room, and I found driven into me a new and deep despair: for I was forced to consider that, after all, there might not be people anywhere, but only ghosts—sent by no one.

My long illness was a relief, and I wished I might not recover—not die, although I knew they thought I might—but live always in the fever that strangled my mind and silenced my ghost. Yet in spite of myself, life began its hideous return, and I was edged toward convalescence and into continued defeat.

So I recovered my health and my sadness. It was almost summer when I left my bed but even its warm green certainty couldn't make me rejoice. I heard mamma whisper to a visitor: "He walks around the house all day like a ghost"—but she couldn't have known what she said.

I was more silent than ever before, more docile. At first my parents seemed disturbed and thought I wasn't completely recovered, but gradually they began to take my manner for granted: I had exchanged one ghosthood for another: I was now a solemn, absent-minded child, but this no longer meant I wasn't well. In fact, I looked better than I ever had, for I sat still in the sun all afternoon and my skin burned brown; I pushed food down my throat in quantities and gained weight. I did anything that pleased them, that kept them from talking to me.

That was why I started taking walks. Because they wanted me to get some exercise.

First I walked in the early morning, but I was troubled by the glare of the pavements and the rushing crowds. So presently, I started walking at twilight when the town was still, and I could watch night pin the streets and houses into a kind of stupor. My walks became patterned: I would go always toward the outskirts of town, toward where the streets were small enough to be called alleys, lanes, and here would I stroll until well after dark.

Now, although I hadn't seen her, I knew there was a street-singer in the town, for often as I walked I could hear a cracked thin voice, a feeble wail, coming from the distance. It was such a sad voice that sometimes I would want to go toward it but would stop myself, knowing that whatever and how great the singer's grief, it was the grief of her ghost.

But one evening, I turned a corner and unexpectedly found her sitting in the middle of the road, surrounded by

shrieking children, her hands upon her face. Though I couldn't at first hear her, she was nonetheless singing, and presently her song became audible through the shouting and through the dark fingers. She sang while the half-dozen kids danced around her, while they spat and screamed, while they stamped up a dust.

"Dirty Miranda!" yelled one little girl. "Here's a penny for your song." She threw a stone at the woman.

"O what've you done?" a boy said, and they all whooped and laughed, one girl hitting herself on the behind as she giggled.

"Dirty Miranda," they chorused.

Although I had never seen one except in book illustrations, I thought Miranda must have been a gypsy: the hands covering her face were thin and dark; ropey black hair was braided behind her shoulders; her dress was shiny purple and showed dark bony knees and legs full of hair. From where I stood at the corner it seemed the children weren't really upsetting her—even though her face was covered. Without moving, without trembling, her body yielded the song.

In a very loud voice, I said: "Get away, you kids! Get away! Let her alone!"

The children froze and I walked toward them slowly. "I said get away, and quicker than quick—get!"

One boy, the tallest, shuffled off, kicking gently at the road as if going was his own idea. In a moment the others followed him, one at a time, a quiet and embarrassed procession.

A girl turned abruptly, screamed, "Dirty Miranda! Dirty boy!" stuck out her tongue at me, and then shrieking and laughing all of them disappeared in haste around the corner.

The singer hadn't moved, and the song continued to

issue from her. I went close up, and although she couldn't see me I shook my head. I thought I must say something kind, but the only words I knew were: "Never mind. They're not real. They're only ghosts."

Her song ended then, and the hands dropped from her face to lie palms-upward in her lap. Small, thin, dark as her hands and legs was her face, like the face I had once seen on a dead baby pigeon: most of it was thin grey waxy lids through which the dark centers showed.

Her mouth suddenly opened, moved before any words came out. Then she snapped: "Don't you think I know?"

At first I couldn't understand what she meant, but when I did, my ribs crushed down upon my heart and for an instant I was blind. In the middle of the summer street, I was so cold it was unbearable. And night moved in to meet me.

When I could speak, I said: "You know?" I felt now that the grief I'd heard in her voice had been my grief, and if, feeling this, I came close to being happy it was because my sorrow bloomed in my mouth as I stood there.

But she said nothing. Groaning with effort, like a much older or fatter person, she slowly lifted herself onto her feet. Her belly hung out in front enormously. She brushed her dress with her hands and then started walking —a heavy, burdened walk.

"Don't go away," I said. "Wait, Miranda."

She paused but didn't look back. "My name isn't Miranda," and she continued walking.

I ran after her and, catching up, I asked: "You know they aren't real? Tell me: you know that we're only ghosts?"

She didn't answer, so I said the same things again, and still she refused to talk.

"Please tell me," I begged. My throat was dry, and my voice sounded like a grown man's: it hurt me to talk.

Without a word, she walked a little faster, but I kept to her pace and soon we were at the most northern foot-bridge of the gully that splits our town like a gash. On the other side would be the slum, and as we began crossing the bridge, I felt less sure of Miranda: perhaps she knew nothing, but had just pretended. I grabbed her arm and shook it. She didn't seem to notice.

Half-way over, I let go of her arm and stopped walking. She turned then, suddenly, and put both her hands on my shoulders. "Someone asked me, did I know they weren't real? O where are you? Can you see me?"

"Yes."

"I'm so afraid."

"Of what? Because we aren't there? It's terrible."

She sighed, nodding, and then very angrily: "Don't you think I know how terrible it is? If only you were there. No one and nothing. No one."

I believed her, and we crossed the bridge.

I believed she knew as well as I about the ghosts, and after a while I stopped trying to make her answer my questions. For talking, ever with Miranda, was useless: it brought us nowhere, it was part of pretending. As we walked I drew away from her and looked up at the walls of the slum and above at the black starry sky and I thought it must be a hot evening although I was still cold. Soon we began passing people who sat on wooden chairs in the street; all of them looked at us as we went by, and some greeted Miranda.

"He's here," she said sharply, and she folded her hands across her belly.

"Who?"

"He's here and he's real."

I was too frightened to talk, and what she said was impossible.

"He was a blind man and he saw in the dark to my room. Now he's in here and he's real."

Putting my hand on her belly I felt movement through my arm, and my breath caught. "Is it possible?"

But she said nothing more, not even when she turned abruptly at a doorway and passed into an unlighted corridor. Not knowing what to do, I hesitated, and she was gone.

After a few seconds, she returned. "Come with me," she said. "I'm afraid."

I followed her into the corridor and up a flight of dark stairs, through a short hallway, to a door. When she entered the room, I remained in the doorway, waiting, watching her silhouette pass back and forth before the window. A lamp went on, and I went into the room, closing the door behind me.

I had never been in a room so ugly as this. The bed took up most of the space—a bed of brass rods like bones—and pushed against the window was a small table and one wooden chair. Beside me, a square of papered wall was torn out to make a cupboard, but it was too dark to see what was inside. While I looked around, Miranda seated herself at the table and began eating, all at once, some cheese, bread and an apple.

"Is this where you live?" I asked, coming to stand near her. She ignored me, ate calmly, and her belly sagged forward, hung between her legs like a sack—a sack of evidence that I was somewhere. "And the blind man?" I asked. I took a piece of the apple from her and decided to copy her silence. But I couldn't imitate her calm: for someone real, unseen, unseeing, was in the room with us.

Presently she stood up, turned off the light, undressed and went into bed.

"I'm afraid," she said.

Taking off my shoes, I lay down beside her in the darkness, on my side, facing the strange high belly whose outline was visible to me. Her arm moved and came to rest upon her belly.

“Tell me how he became a person,” I said softly, but I didn’t expect an answer.

She breathed loudly and began to speak. “I didn’t know he was there. I said, there’s no one there, and in the dark he took off his dark glasses. He came next to me and moved all the time.”

“How did he move?” I sat up, the pulses banging in my head. “Like now?” Reaching, I put my hand for a second time upon her belly and felt the flesh ripple. “Is this the way he moved? Tell me, please tell me how.”

To my amazement she began to laugh so loud and hard that the bed shook and answering noises came from the walls.

“Is that how?” I asked, listening to her and to the buzz of the walls. “Tell me, *I want to be real.*” My head was swelling with her laughter, being pumped full of it. I felt my skull growing like her belly, my brow expanding in all directions. My head swelled over my eyes so that in the dark I was blinded and I had to use her words: “I’m afraid. O Miranda, I’m afraid.”

She stopped laughing. “You know that isn’t my name.”

“I’m sick,” I said and lay back on the bed aware of the world whirling under me. Too weak to vomit, I lay spinning with the world, listening to Miranda.

“I thought he went away, and my heart was broken. But after a few weeks I knew he was here—and the one who went away, he was the ghost.” She was quiet a moment. “But he’s going to leave me. They said he’ll go out of me again forever.”

“No,” I whispered, straining myself to speak.

"Yes," she said with hatred. "Yes, he will. And no one will be real anymore. He'll come out naked and put on his dark glasses and go away."

"O no," I said, terrified that everything might vanish. "He'll always stay inside and always be real. And me? What about me?"

"I'm afraid," she moaned, and we were against each other shivering.

"Don't be afraid. You'll see, he'll stay." When she seemed calmer, I said: "Tell me what he's like."

She held me to her, and when she put her lips to my ear, I thought she was going to say something, but she only hummed, a soft keening humm—yet because of this, the size of my head seemed to shrink. Between us lay all possibilities, quivering and uncertain, pushing me to hope and to sleep.

My mother's voice and not Miranda's screams awakened me. I heard her sounding shocked and unbelieving in the street. When I realized the room was textured with cries and that I was alone in bed, I shouted, "Where are you?" then saw Miranda near the table, squatting, her face twisted like the muscles of a strongman. The mouth was open in a continual scream.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"He's coming," she roared.

"He's coming?" I thought she must mean my father.

"Out. He's leaving my body."

And then I knew. "No, O no, he isn't. Stop it!" I sprang from the bed and clutched her shoulders. "Get up! Stop it! You're doing it yourself, and I won't let you. You're making it happen. Stop it, don't you know what you're doing?"

Her head was shaking rapidly and her hands moved:

she was all motion. "It's not my fault. I'm not doing it. There's no way of stopping it."

Her screams grew louder, drove at me so that I could hardly think any more, so that I couldn't even wonder why all the people had come around to pull me away and to shout at each other and Miranda.

"Please, please," I yelled. "Don't let them. They don't understand what they're doing. Keep him—don't let him be a ghost. Don't give him to them."

Rocking back and forth, she shook her head. "I'll go away," I shouted. But she said nothing, and I saw it was impossible for me to stay. As I went to the door, I said softly, "I'm going away—the way he did. The way he will again."

Above the noise she heard me as I had heard her song. "It must happen," she cried, and gave herself into the hands of the ghosts.

Ghosts were everywhere. There was nothing else and nothing more. Pushing my way through the door, I ran down the steps and out to the street. My mother caught me in her arms. My father looked at me without expression in his eyes.

"David, David!" Her face shifted stupidly because she didn't know what to say. When I drew away from her, she dropped her eyes. "Your shoes," she whispered, relieved. "You haven't got your shoes on." And she smiled. "Never mind at all, my baby. We'll get you a new pair. I saw some lovely brown ones over at—"

"Leave me alone!" I bellowed.

Papa started. "David—"

"Can't you just leave me alone? Both of you! Can't you leave me in peace?"

"What is it, David?" she asked. "Come home."

From above our heads, like a wail of defeat and submission, came a long sharp scream.

“My name isn’t David,” I said gently, and since it was useless to tell them anything else, I started walking away, as fast as I could in my stocking feet.

Behold Goliath

THE BUS

He is sitting opposite the doors. Outside, a thick snow falls and the bus pushes along through it slowly, like an old blind dog smelling its way. Sometimes it takes ten minutes to pass the two corners between stations—and who waits there anyway? Those who, unable to sit out the storm, cannot afford to taxi through it. The bus reaches St. Margaret's Hospital, recognizable only because of its lighted windows, yellow rectangles afloat in the blizzard. The bus stammers forward, stops. Inward fold the doors. There at the curb stands Medea with a murdered son limp across each arm. In the frozen snow-silence, the wet dark face of Medea, crisscrossed with splashes of black wet hair. She remains under the fall of snow, forever, fixed in her tragic moment. She moves; the tragic face becomes one of hatred; the children begin to bawl like human brats; and the woman herself, immigrant or refugee, clumps up into the bus raging, screaming, cursing in a language Goliath can neither understand nor identify (despite his proficiency in eight ancient and modern tongues) but which unlanguaged tells how she has waited in the storm, how her boys are impaled upon cold, how her husband is mad with worry, how she execrates this land and this life. Goliath shivers, suspecting her of Satan or of God. And for weeks after, he cannot

get on a bus without being almost felled by his unending wait in the snow and the weight of the dead children on his arms. Goliath wakes in time to prevent himself from broadcasting hatred upon driver and passengers, and then to challenge the motives of his own restraining hand.

RAIN

Night had not fallen, nor would it ever. It was raised out of sight, lifted and held against the sky by a heaving leviathan of colored gaseous lights. The five o'clock scurry had already begun. By turning a corner, Goliath plunged himself into the sweeping haste of raincoated figures, gesticulating under the fat but gentle rain, talking above it, battling with or against umbrellas on the glassy streets that were packed with hooting, slow-moving traffic. Disgorged by their shops and offices, boys and girls, beautiful in evening freedom, held on to each other and laughed. Free, they were free! Freedom was in their laughter, in their flushed hurry. Goliath almost believed in it, swaying this way and that, smiling in spite of himself and hastening with them. Dark windows zippered up the façades, shutting the buildings like baggage. Tires splashed red-lit gutter pools on pedestrians too rushed to curse. Dripping blood, they ran. In flames, they ran. O the turbulent hurry, the freedom! They raced into subways and buses, filled up taxi cabs, fled round corners, sped along the avenues. Goliath hurried, joyful as another. Where to? He hesitated, stood poked and jostled by the rush, horrified at the faint moss of envy that had sprung over his heart. Where to? Impelled to their monotony: an evening's entertainment, a cranky brood, an aproned drab, steak and salad, the television set. In their souls sick to death of everything and flying back

to it with joy. Was he wrong in so presuming, Goliath wondered, looking at the girls and young men that pushed by him. At a distance, in a crowd, people always seemed to deny everything he thought about them, everything he had observed in himself and others, individually. Away, in the mob, how like a wild collapse of rain they were—free, spontaneous, purposeful. They justified belief in man: democracy was possible for those one didn't know personally. For, each at a time, piece by piece, they were driven and empty as raindrops, as himself.

The gentle five o'clock rain that had fallen through the lights like twists of cellophane by six became tumid and passionate with wind. The populace fled, except for Goliath, and a battle was on in the empty streets. Nature flew at the throat of the city; the buildings bent without breaking. Their mutual hatred was plain, terrific. Town and weather abandoned to each other and incongruous, leaning back or assailing, a drench and tumble upon massive stone, and finally the trickling reconciliation in the sewers. As Goliath watched he could feel the city attempt to cry out through him, or then he could feel the earth from under the concrete quiver up his body toward the rain. He would not be moved, would not take sides, not even when he felt his lips trembling as he watched the huge sewer-mouths receive the downpour. However violent they seemed, Goliath knew these were minor engagements—a flash, an illumination that revealed why the war was being waged. Nature could endure nothing but itself.

BERNARD

Perfect was he, without flaw, from the kinky brown hair and pug nose to the knock-knees and long feet. He

excelled at his studies, was an extraordinary athlete, knew the reasons behind and the directions before international politics, could piss a wider arc than any other boy, and in his parents' night-table lay manifold photographs and rubber devices with which his father titillated his mother (or vice versa). Under such circumstances, whose heart could fail to love? Sitting beside him at school was physic to Goliath, for then as now love gave him diarrhea as hatred constipated him. Eros' arrows were so many suppository tablets and Goliath's bowels serenaded the neighboring lad without pause. He was forced to leave the room so often to disburden his passion that the teacher at last said he must bring a note from his mother if he wished to be excused with such frequency. Thereafter did he suffer even more greatly for his love. Bernard was a pompous thuggish vain little braggart: perfect. He had a placid heartless smug little soul: perfect. He sat in judgment on Goliath, believing him a fool and refusing to accept any other interpretation. The defendant found this verdict just and sought to augment his folly that he might stay the longer at court. Bernard and his family presently left town, and though Goliath never saw him again, any act of virtue or sobriety, any grave or welcome thought into which he may have stumbled had this for a reward:

The benediction, the approval, the crushing and stifling, the apotheosis and annihilation of the knock-kneed wide-pissing tumor in Goliath's guts.

ENTERTAINMENT

Like any other great city, this one offered its populace more than merely every-evening freedom; it offered a variety of slaveries to which the freedom might be put. This

was necessary, Goliath knew, because he who has given away his soul between nine and five cannot usually bear to face it (or does not know where to find it) between five and nine. The city offered distractions, glorious dreams. One could descend from the unreality of an office to the unreality of a street and thence to the unreality of a night club, a theater; a public meeting, a music hall, a religious activity, a library, a brothel, a circus, a gambling casino, a street filled with whores and whoresses, a picture gallery, a queer bar, a luna park, or most frequently the rectangular darkness of the national church with its two-dimensional gods in technicolor. Those who had been unable to encounter themselves throughout the day thronged these places at night that they might escape themselves a while. Goliath often found he had been dragged in along with them and for much the same reasons. All was dissolved into the evening's pasture. O delicious! O the grasses of oblivion! Their fragrance wrapped around him, spun his shadow into the world of men. The show, the dance, the frantic toilings were; but he was not. All existed because he perceived, and all being perceived he did not exist. Despite the narcotic joy he took from these moments, they were the most anxious of his life. Under the slept ruminations, something threatened. He labored like a juggler tossing translucent glass balls. His attention must not waver. He must pitch them relentlessly. Should one drop not only would all fall smashing but they would release something unfaceable whose outline he detected through the misted glass. With colossal effort, Goliath would burst himself out of the balls, and he would observe the preposterous covenant into which he and his fellows had entered. The absurdity of being here, surrounded by faces and objects composed of stupidity, blindness—how terrible! Yet to leave was as much a surrender as to stay, so usually he remained and

continued, the charge of consciousness oftentimes receding but flowing even then like a silence in the row behind when a persistent hummer has for an instant paused.

THE WINDOW

He came loping along through a late afternoon fog, across the planned glass-and-brick shopping center until his attention was pierced by a swift claw of light. This imposition annoyed him, and that it had the power to do so—to annoy as well as impose—irked him still more deeply. He hesitated and, because he felt no curiosity, allowed himself to turn toward the source of illumination and to step into a mixture of fog and fluorescence, a bluish mud, suspended before the vast show-window whence the light issued. The display was crowded with household furnishings, but the backdrop, a gush of brown and yellow drapery that seemed to fall as innocently as water, immediately compelled Goliath's eyes to the left wall. Aware of this he resisted and snapped his gaze to the right, sickening as he realized that he had been taken captive by the window and whichever way he looked was immaterial: he was in the clutches of the left wall. To resist, to submit, to look this way or that, to run bellowing across the marble paths of the shopping center, to smash up the display—where was the difference? Wearily, he closed his eyes and then to avoid not-looking at the left wall, he looked at it and felt an instant's relief which shamed him.

What had Goliath been directed to see? A fairly large table spread over with figured white linen, decorated with branches of plastic honeysuckle, set with porcelain, silver and crystal. Six chairs of mahogany and yellow leather compelled Goliath's eyes still further, toward a matching

buffet full of bottles, glasses and magazines. So very *gracious*, he obediently thought, knowing this was the word the decorator had sought to ring up in his mind. The word was long and thick, delicious, could twist one's heartbeats into unexpected patterns, and Goliath imagined how the decorator's luscious lips had belabored the word while fixing the display: Belaboring it too were the half-dozen people who would ultimately sit down at the table. Partly amused now by his surrender, and partly breathless with despite of himself, Goliath watched them arrive: the elderly hostess, arranging a vase of gladiolas, had purple hair and a cold, creamy complexion that flowed the length of her body, seamless and unblemished even between the toes, and entered inward to form her stomach, womb and brain. That handsome adolescent on the right was her husband —wrinkle-eyed, his golden temples graciously silvered to make him seem old enough to drink of the imported vermouth he now poured into glasses for his four perpetually happy and elegant guests. As they were, these six in the room, so they would always be, like Olympian gods: the crescendo of humanity. Untroubled, witty, unvisceral and of course gracious, these six had sat having wine before dinner ever since they invented themselves, their nonthirst inundating history. There were no hunchbacks among them, no crucifixions, no broken hearts, no self-lacerations, no bodhi trees, no cystitis to quicken the wine to fire or to blood.

“O Georgie, Georgie, look!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t it nice?”

“Not as nice as you,” he murmured.

“Yes, ah yes, much nicer,” she sighed.

Turning, Goliath saw behind him a snuggling young couple staring in at the display, their subpoenaed eyes ghosted with dreams, accepting an invitation to make of the

perfect six a perfect eight. It was intolerable, suffocating, this window of delusion, this glass case packaging the relentlessly, remorselessly Good Life, and Goliath's fury grew almost as compelling as the brown and yellow backdrop. He wanted to storm the shop and its owner, upbraid him for inciting fraudulent emotions, pernicious imaginings, throttle his brains until the six gracious vanities melted out of history, until the decorator's tongue fell spitless, voiceless as a slaughtered ox. Goliath's outraged heart shook as he attempted to control his anger, astonished at how far he had let himself go. He had been driven off first by imagination and then by passion: he had been flung around the blue mud by his wild little self—as if he cared a hoot about delusions or vanities!

Wherefore Goliath's fury? He knew that passions never looked like themselves: they edged sideways out of the dark with painted faces, with colored hair, with odors masked, with bodies padded or crushed, and they swallowed men whole. Who could give himself up to them quickly, this way, on a street? He knew there were endless possible motives to his anger, and he knew how thronged he was with self-deceit—his heart was as crowded, as impatient, as treacherous as an army: it could easily carry him to chaos and to death. Yet, when he turned away from the display, he wondered if he were not simply a coward. Perhaps he hadn't raped the furniture shop because he didn't dare. That was all: he simply had not dared. No, no, once more he had fallen victim to the left wall—and it was all the same whether he had or hadn't attacked the shop: he was in *its* power, not his own.

THE WORLD BEYOND THE WORLD BEYOND

Not champagne nor the kingdom of heaven nor election day nor the Aegean nor Kant nor Einstein: but the very, the merest of Black Bread and Garlic. It is the unknowable Sesame Goliath may approach but never attain, through chewing or smelling or looking. Beyond everything possible for him, there will always be the smart doings of the Black-Bread-and-Garlic Set, the transcendental wisdom of the Black-Bread-and-Garlic Eaters, the narcotic beauty of the Black-Bread-and-Garlic Isles. And the prophet was a money-lender whom Goliath, aged ten, saw twice in a mansion with Tudor windows and stone floors. He had silver things in his parlor, leaded glass doors between rooms, a kimono'd wife fat and hairy suggesting sweated rumps and powdered armpits. On a lacquered coffee-table were Japanese tea cups (the very memory of which made Goliath's teeth tingle), Turkish Delight, cognac, and an enormous volume of Gibbon. That was all he recollects of Mr. Bodley, except for three sentences spoken to Goliath's mother either during the first visit, when the money passed one way, or during the second, when it passed the other. Said Mr. Bodley:

“We only live once.”

“The days drag and the years fly.”

“There's nothing so tasty as black bread rubbed with garlic and a little bit of salt.”

To all three of which Goliath's swooning brain concurred, though he knew little of days and years, had barely lived, and never yet tasted black bread with garlic. Yet it was all so, absolutely and immutably. Goliath passed from Mr. Bodley's life but the prophet passed into his blood.

HIMSELF

In the dark, he walked by a man who looked like his father.

It was extraordinary: he had been afraid, and only there at the corner, as the racket in his breast subsided, did he realize how much. His childhood had driven straight up through him, disregarding the man, as it might on a dismal Sunday or during an equinox. And there were people who could not identify him with circumstance, there were women whom he frightened because he was hardly anything other than a man—and a man is such a naked thing, like those awful creatures who expose themselves from behind trees in the park. Whatever objects, whatever persons he had passed in his life, he was never free to pass them again, for they were him and they called out to themselves as he passed.

It gathered together in bits and pieces from along the roadside, and then it said: I—and when it ran in the rain it felt free. Goliath could not stomach the inanity of it, the way it was enslaved to its eyes for sight, to its ears for sound, to its tongue for taste or kisses. It met another and it hated or loved or was indifferent. A tap on the knee and its leg flew up lightly, heavy with irony—if it hadn't the irony would have been heavier still.

Though he saw no reason to be done with life, Goliath believed he could easily sit down before a gas oven where fruit tarts baked on their tin and blow out the flame, extinguish himself while he screamed in torn confusion, terrified by death, enchanted by the fragrance of the tarts. Nevertheless, when the ponderous heat at his buttocks had been suddenly replaced by a cool blade flashing not unpleasantly along his belly that lovely summer night under

the boardwalk, he (who had been up to no good anyway) wept and trembled, emptied his pockets, begged to be spared this life, this teeny-tiny ootsy-tootsy life. He was left alive and penniless, an X flicked upon his abdomen, and like his mortality he bore the X to this day, though with the passing of time it had become distorted and blue as an excrescent vein, as a bird in expatiate flight, as a one-legged dancer in strangulated ecstasy.

FURNITURE

One winter's evening, Goliath found himself looking at a film so ridiculous that not only did he stop tossing glass balls, he flung them down in disgust. He decided to leave. On his lap he had been holding one end of what he supposed was his scarf and, making to lift it now, it held fast. Though he pulled, it would not come off his lap, and several seconds went by before Goliath realized that the man in the next seat was tugging the other end of it.

"Would you mind 'tting go?" said Goliath. "I'd like to leave."

"Excuse me, sir: but it's mine," the man whispered, his tone so complacent, so full of calm pride and unequivocal ownership that Goliath was shaken into rage.

"O no it isn't!" he cried and was hushed and complained at by the people roundabout. The sound of his own infuriated voice came back to him, and at once he turned his anger inward. To have thrown away all his possessions, to be master of nothing more than what he wore on his back—and then to fuss about a yard of brown wool! Releasing the scarf he sprang from his seat: "Keep it if you like. I don't care."

"Wait, wait," said the man, grasping his arm and forc-

ing him down again. "Don't get so excited. I'll light a match."

"No, no, really. I don't want the damn thing."

"But if you think it's yours—" The man was searching through his pockets. "Here they are!"

A match was struck and Goliath was shamed by an unmistakably red scarf. To hide himself and his embarrassment, he bent over, mumbling, looking on the floor.

The man laughed. "It's not on the floor. You're still wearing yours."

Some strained laughter, apologies, think-nothing-of-its, and will-you-kindly-shut-up-we-want-to-see-the-film-theres. Goliath rose, anxious to escape, but the man came after him up the aisle, still laughing and thinking nothing of it. Goliath hurried; the man hurried after. Outside, under the marquee, Goliath paused and looked back: the stranger's thin paper-white face came opposite him. What more did he want than his scarf, this man who kept laughing even now though he stretched and spoke: "Let's go have some coffee."

The suggestion was so irrelevant, the suggester so superfluous, that Goliath could neither refuse nor accept. He walked down the street with the stranger, stopped with him at a door beside a grocery.

"I live just here," said the man.

Goliath followed him up a short stairway which smelled of varnish and garlic, and because this odor seemed to Goliath suddenly an inherent quality of this and all similar vestibules, he felt he had climbed, smelled and followed a hundred times before.

"Every two months I have a week on the graveyard—not bad, hey?" said the man as they climbed. "Because I'm ten years with the factory, the Potomac. You know it, I suppose—pots and pans, the big modern one over on the west side. Next year I'm off the graveyard altogether."

The man was lying; this was clear to Goliath, though he had no idea why nor what about. "This is my week, so I go to cop a snooze at the flicks to make sure I'm up by half-past eleven."

"It probably isn't even ten-thirty yet," said Goliath.

"But once I'm up," he laughed falsely, switching the red scarf at his shoulders, "I can't get back to sleep." With these words, he had pushed open a door at the top of the stairs, and Goliath heard an echo—yet despite the echo he was so unprepared for what he saw that his legs weakened.

In the two large rooms separated by an arched doorway there was nothing but an iron cot with a grey spread. Nothing else, except a pair of sneakers placed neatly under the arch. Goliath knew at once, as he had known about the lie, that the man had lived here for years. The rooms bore heavily the air of his residence as he, moving across the floor, bore heavily their vacancy. But why should this established emptiness so upset Goliath? He had been in scores of places called homes that had no more furniture than this, sometimes less—a mattress or a blanket, newspapers on the floor. He had visited people in monks' cells, in bohemian lofts, in cellars, in packing cases. Within Goliath's own non-existent home, there was naturally less than belonged to this man: there were no walls, no floors, no ceilings. To invite someone home would be to invite him into the void. Yet this man's apartment shocked Goliath.

"Give me your coat—and your scarf, ha, ha! I won't try to steal it, I promise. You can sit down over there on the bed while I put up the coffee."

The coats went into a wall closet.

"Go on, sit down. It won't collapse. See? There you go. Say, maybe you'd like something stronger than coffee. I just happen to have a fifth of rye."

Goliath nodded. The man opened a door in the opposite wall, entered a small bare kitchen, returned a moment later with a nearly-full bottle and two mugs. He sat down beside Goliath on the cot. They drank. The guest sat in silence but the host spoke at great length. He talked of the Potomac factory, of the nature of his work, of the fine guys who labored alongside him; of this and that, of nothing. The feeling of weakness had left Goliath with every nerve in his body awake, extending beyond the circumscribing flesh, charging off, reaching out for an explanation of its own sensitivity. Goliath listened to the man's voice, not to the words but to the voice, the tone, the chords, the harmonies: What happened then made his nerves recoil abruptly like the horns of a snail from an alien touch. He began to feel the furniture.

He felt all of it, every piece of it that wasn't there: the thick soft rugs and heavy draperies, the packed bookshelves and cozy chairs, the sofas, the wardrobes, the end tables, side tables, cocktail and coffee tables, the lamps, the picture frames, the mirrors—everything big, massively Victorian, things of oak, every corner stuffed with tiers of porcelain and glass, every chair filled with cushions as soft and stuffed as loaves of fresh bread. He felt his heart struggling under the weight of it, and the emptiness that reached his eyes was more absurd than gluttony, worse than vanity, more terrible than affectation. It existed only by virtue of what wasn't there. Goliath sat on the cot laden down by every book and piece of clothing he had ever thrown away; they were inescapable; he was he who did not have them. Every loss had increased his possessions. Through the violence of his heart he heard his voice: "Why don't you have any furniture?"

The man flushed and was a long while silent. "Well, I don't know," he said at last, then paused, then unhappily:

"I don't have many visitors. I mean, naturally I have friends but—I've always meant to get some things. I really should, you know. A nice fat pair of armchairs would be a good thing, wouldn't it? I don't know why—isn't it funny? I earn ninety a week and I'm a bachelor. You get so used to things, you don't even notice any more. Yeah, a nice fat pair of armchairs: that sounds real good."

He was an innocent, a lonely big-city void. Probably he was queer and had misinterpreted the scarf-battling—or no, he was anything for anyone extending a nice fat pair of arms. Like his rooms, he was by virtue of what wasn't there. He was too naïve to pretend a principle or an affection; his void was not of man's making but one that man had not filled in. Goliath thought back to his dream of walking naked and soundless, holding himself in his hands like opaque water, and he thought back beyond that to where the water cleared and to where it was not—the where being there because the water was not—until for an instant his mind fell into a hole the size of the cosmos which was because everything was not. The fillings-in by man or nature were a covering "p of reality, for reality was a no-reality, a nothing masked by illusion: shadows were the only substance.

Suddenly aware of his mind toiling with words, Goliath was relieved to recognize the trick of ultimates and principles. The man's rooms were empty, that was all. Goliath had given away his possessions and no more. Neither circumstance had any meaning beyond itself and the labors of the mind.

The man had somehow entered upon the story of his life. It progressed like the whisky bottle from a glittering full golden thing to one nearly empty. Goliath poured out the last inch quickly to make him be done. A churchbell tolled from across the street, and the host spoke more

loudly but the guest counted. It was midnight. Goliath stood up and said he would be going. No, he could not stay the night. Yes, yes, he would come again. Often. Soon. Very soon.

NICOLETTE DANCES

He is baptized. He floats out of Pamlico Sound, as once Venus did from other waters, with billowing white gown, immortal soul and all. Too marvelous.

And absolutely painless, like buying on the installment plan. He goes down to the beach with a sailor and is unexpectedly saved.

But the payments on his purchase soon begin. He who has always been his body now begins to see it as an adjunct to his soul. One has a soul, and to it all qualities adhere, and the soul is with God, and the soul is God. Three dollars and ninety-five cents a month; don't forget your receipt. One identifies with the soul, as do the saints, or with the qualities, as does Goliath. The saints suffer the flesh, and Goliath suffers the spirit. He likes to drink and overeat, to cheat and lie and steal, to give himself up to his passions, to be frequently laid, to dress carefully and expensively. But now everything has a name and is a sin. He is in agony —especially at work, since he earns his living by performing a striptease in a nightclub. He is tormented by a recurring dream, thus:

Nicolette is in the midst of her number which consists of choosing men from the audience to dance with, each partner in turn relieving her of a garment. She is left, in the dream as at the nightclub, wearing nothing but a rhinestone G-string. At this point, in life, the band invariably stops playing. But not in sleep. The music goes on,

and in consequence Nicolette must continue choosing partners. Her G-string is torn away, and directly after it her manhood—yet she dances, terror bristling within. The next man takes away her right arm, and the next her left. She makes frantic gorgeous eyes at the bandleader who bows and smiles but does not lower his baton. The dance continues. Off goes her head, her shoulders, her big shaved chest, her belly. She is a pair of hysterical legs tripping in the spotlight—though only for a moment, since the evangelist who baptized her comes out on the floor and deprives her of both limbs at once. Everywhere is strewn with Nicolette's clothes and her carrion, but to her horror the band goes on playing, and while there is nothing left of herself, she must still dance. From away yonder she hears the trumpeting voice of the club manager as if over a loud-speaker: "Come, come, lad, pull yourself together. This will never do." But poor Nicolette dances and dances and dances and dances.

At the moment of awakening, he reaches his trembling hands to the night-table and seizes the cup of cold coffee and the sweet roll he new puts out nearly every night in anticipation of the dream. *Je mange donc je suis.* Or if the food isn't there, he sings and screams at the top of his lungs. *Je fais beaucoup de bruit donc je suis.* Or if there is someone else in his bed, he turns to him in panic. *On m'encule donc je suis.*

Goliath suffers mightily.

MOTHER

All the windows were dark except that one in the corner of the living room where Dolly always left a small night-lamp burning so that burglars would think there

were people awake in her house. Quietly, quietly, he unlocked the door and dragged his burden across the threshold, into the hall that ran the length of the house. Should he strip the man? When he switched on the hall light, a wave of nausea made him decide against handling the dirt-stiff clothing. The man's stink seemed more powerful indoors and with the light on.

Goliath tugged him to the door of Dolly's bedroom and carefully turned the knob. Light could not easily wake her, but she was sensitive to sound. Therefore, with the utmost caution, he silently pushed the door inward until he saw her sleeping face. It was round and phosphorescent as the moon because of the night-creams and lotions, and cotton-tipped toothpicks stuck out of her ears so that, should her head turn in sleep, she would wake before smudging the pillowcase. The mouth was slightly open, giving little phlegmy snores like a tomcat. Quickly now! Goliath shoved the man in toward the right, against the wall opposite her bed. He retreated quickly, shut the door. He went back down the hall, switched off the light and locked himself out of the house.

The blood shrieked in his throat and head as he pressed the doorbell. He waited, pressed a second time. No lunatic burst of screams. No sound. Perhaps she had fainted. Again he pushed the buzzer. O God, perhaps she was dead!

"Who's there?" she asked from behind the door.
"Who is it?"

"O Mother, it's me: your Goliath." When the door opened he embraced her fervently.

"Golly-boy, Golly-boy," said she. Her voice was agitated, surely not because of the chill of standing in her nightgown nor because of her pleasure in seeing him. Taking his arm, she led him toward the living room.

"No, go back to bed," he said. "You'll be warmer and I can sit beside you. We'll talk there."

"To go to' bed now! Why, I'll get you something to eat."

"I've eaten. It's chilly in the house—you go on to bed."

"I can get into bed anytime. It isn't often we can have a gab in the parlor, is it?" She hesitated, and he wondered at her nervousness. "I tell you what, you go fix me and yourself a cup of tea. That'll be real luxurious for me. Will you do that? And meanwhile I can wipe this mess off my face."

He did as she asked. He boiled the water and fixed a tray. This done, he walked back down the corridor, entered her room without knocking, and set the tray on the dressing table. She was sitting at the edge of her bed wiping her face with crumpled knots from a roll of toilet paper.

"I'll be ready in a jiffy, Golly."

He sniffed. "What is that smell, Mother?"

She said nothing.

"Don't you smell it?" He began looking around the room. "It's very strange, isn't it?"

Her hands no longer moved. Motionless, they covered all her face below the eyes—and the pink cloud of faded hair seemed to stiffen. Under the bed, just where the scatter-rug ended, Goliath saw a puffed grey hand. He grew rigid with surprise and disgust, then, recovering, spun around and went to the door.

"O Golly, Golly," she moaned, and though he stopped, he did not look at her. "Believe me, Golly, *no!*"

"Believe you?" he roared, going to her. Her face was expressionless, still masked by the night-lotions that were now tracked by the grey rails of tears pendant at her jaws.

"Pardon my poor soul," she whimpered, the tooth-picks trembling.

"It's better to marry than to burn," he said severely. "But it's better to burn than to fornicate."

Goliath knelt at the bed, grabbed the puffed hand and

pulled until a head lay on the scatter-rug. "Where did you get this heap of filth? Aren't you ashamed? Why is he lying like this on the floor?" Goliath kicked him, but he didn't move. "Is he dead?"

"Is he *dead*? Is he, Golly? O my God, is he?"

Holding his palm above the sprawling lips, Goliath felt the warm breath. "No, only dead drunk!"

"Thank God for that!" Her hands now covered the whole of her face, and her body shook with sobbing. "Take him away," she pleaded.

"Me? You want *me* to take him away?"

"Please, Golly, please," she wept, the tears running out between her fingers. "I couldn't touch him—"

"Couldn't touch him!" he repeated scornfully.

"Not now I couldn't. O take him away!"

"All right. I'll put him in the parlor and throw him out in the morning."

Her hands dropped and she turned her eyes full upon him. "In clear daylight, Golly, no! No, Golbaby—everyone would see."

"There is nothing hidden that will not come abroad. Nothing! *Nothing!*" They were silent a moment. "I'll take him down the street."

"Right now? My blessed, my sainted Goliath. Put a dollar in the poor man's pocket. You'll find a little money in one of your daddy's suits there in the closet. In the striped one, the grey." Goliath, moved by her thoughtfulness, obeyed. "My poor Larry, if he'd lived to see this night, he'd have died for sure. Forgive me, my La!" And she burst once again into tears, covering her eyes with bits from the toilet roll as if trying to arrest the bleeding of a wound. She ground the paper against her eyes, her head trembling so violently that one of the toothpicks dropped to the floor.

"You'd better go to sleep." Having put the dollar in

the man's pocket, Goliath grabbed him under the arms and pulled him from the room. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

"No, Golly, please!"

"Go to sleep."

"I'll try, my boy. But maybe I'm too nervous to sleep."

"There are some tablets in your night-table, aren't there? Take four to make sure."

"Two's enough. Too many's not too good."

"Four won't hurt. You know that perfectly well."

She nodded. "All right. I'll take four."

"Sleep well," he said, switching off the light. "And may God forgive you."

"He will, Golly, if He knows you did."

"Well, who am I to stand between Him and the exercise of His mercy? I forgive you, Mother." He sighed and, as he closed the door, she said: "Bless you, my boy."

Goliath took the man up in his arms, left the house and, with a feeling of great sadness, carried him down the street and dropped him gently over a hedge into the garden at the corner. Where would Goliath now go? Wearily, he returned to his mother's house. She was sitting in the living room, in the chair beside the little night-lamp. Goliath went to her, dropped to his knees and laid his head upon her lap. He wept heartily while she stroked his hair.

"Tell me," he begged. "You, my only connection with eternity—you, through whose womb I touch the roots of creation. Tell me, tell me who I am."

THE PARTY

Goliath enjoyed the walk to Gloria Tilt's. The hawthorns and sycamores were in full leaf, carved massively from the night by street-lamps or garden-lights, and here

and there, running with the sudden blood of spring, the maniacal redbuds. Once, he knew, LeBel Heights had been perhaps a dozen houses, those of the very rich, the anciently mysteriously rich, with high bursten walls, tall hedgerows, great ivied gates along the walks. One used to see the gables and the curtained Lincolns coming out the driveways, and one practically died of excitement. The mighty lived there, not the monied; one had hardly thought of them in terms of money. Where were they now? Goliath had no idea. Time had knocked down the mansions, the walls, the hedgerows and the mighty—and the rich had arrived, the authentically rich. All the fences were now knee-high or breast-high, the houses set far far back on their grounds, and the gardens hewn and gorgeous for public consumption. (And why not? Had not Caesar left his lands to the people?) Goliath consumed as he walked. Some of the gardens were terraced, stepping back toward the houses with bouquets of spring flowers: the earth bringing tribute. Or again, the illusion was reversed, and a very waterfall of blossom poured down toward the road, away from the house. Goliath walked, consuming the aroma, the lilac most heavy as always in the fresh days of spring. O he knew who lived in all the houses, but nonetheless he felt a passing fondness for them as for shopgirls in their evening freedom. I, said Mr. Payne's garden, am Barney G. Payne. I, said Mr. and Mrs. Kraus's garden, am Martin and Hermione Kraus. I, said the shopgirl's freedom, am the shopgirl. Goliath did not protest against his feeling of warmth for all nature, including nonexistent mankind, and so arrived at Mrs. Tilt's party unusually pleased with the idea of seeing those who would be there.

They were all there, in the garden beyond the cars and station wagons, among the buffet-tables and the tulip trees, under the strings of colored lights.

There was Horace Trench. He went into the city once a month for—what he bragged was—a change of luck. Yet his changes were so similar to his wife that only the most literal-minded person would have accused him of adultery.

There was Patrick Rubin. He was sending his wife for psychoanalysis as she was pregnant again and therefore prone to manifest her strong unconscious death wish by crying every afternoon at five o'clock. Patrick Rubin did not believe in psychoanalysis. When a student at the university, he had spent two years being analyzed. He went because a pretty young woman pushed him away and told him he was smug, complacent, patronizing. His vocabulary changed radically, as did his *Weltanschauung* and, since any change of ideas makes a thinker feel he has come closer to the truth (even when the new idea serves to negate that very feeling), he became even more smug, even more complacent, even more patronizing. How did he know? The same pretty young lady pushed him away and told him so. Once again he sailed closer to the truth: he left analysis and school, and entered business. Why then was he sending his wife for treatment? What else was he supposed to do, he asked Goliath humbly—the truth was the truth, even if a man didn't believe in it.

Barney G. Payne was there. He looked at women the way young men in advertisements step off buses and look at the future—so confident of triumph that they need not hide the fact they covet it. "In my estimation, Goliath, the fashionable attitude toward women in the world today is to consider them as wanting one of two things in a man—either that he has money or is built big, *bien-menthé*, as the French call it. But I say no. A woman responds to a man when she hears his soul chanting Te Deum for her. You'll pardon the comparison, but I see that a truly devout person

is never drawn to a cathedral because of its treasures or the size of its steeple but because of the devotion inside its walls."

John Flashman was there. "The great boulevard was planned and built in the days when important people arrived in town by train. But now its panorama is wasted on commuters, students and laborers from the suburban areas. The important people come like angels nowadays and (according to the newsreels) weep or frown as they are driven from the airport through the slums. We must bellow for improvements, howl for our right to keep pace with progress. If we don't hurry, do you know what's going to happen? We're going to put another triumphal boulevard up in the wrong place."

Was Goliath there? Why did he wish to know? He was merely curious. Why did he wish to know? In order to torture himself. Why did he wish to know? That he might stop wishing to know. The last, he realized, was as likely an answer as any other, perhaps more so, for the only thing one did with a desire was seek to end it, this way or that. One might strengthen it or prolong its moment of gratification; one might run around the block or stop in the nick of time; the fire might be built into a raging holocaust —perhaps for no other purpose than to make a bigger quench.

Of course Horace's wife Mildred was there. "You don't think I'm ridiculous? Really? I feel so embarrassed! Imagine me, silly Milly from Gravy, cooking a chicken cacciatore." Beneath her apparent shallowness and stupidity, she was shallow and stupid, but her dedication to the role of mother and wife gave her an exaggeratedly lifelike quality, like an animal or a figure in a nineteenth-century novel. She believed in happiness and therefore was always somewhat surprised that she had problems she

could not handle effectively. She had problems with her husband, her children, her three sisters, two brothers, their mates and twelve offspring, her housekeeping, her thrice-weekly woman whose cruel sarcasms martyred Mildred, for all the other homes in LeBel Heights had daily help, or more, sometimes much more. She would die if she had to ask that ugly loathsome sneering woman to come twice a week. But what were they going to do? They could barely manage on Horace's salary. "Probably you think we're fools," she said, astonishing Goliath. Had she suddenly become aware of his presence and attributed to him the quality of judge? He felt as he did when Thackeray or Stendhal reared in their chairs and asked him to pity poor Amelia, to comprehend Julien. Who, what, did they think he was? The authors never answered but Mildred replied almost immediately by giving him to understand she was not speaking to him. Mam and Paps, she said, had raised their six children on thirty dollars a week, and us with ten times as much—look at these hands, Goliath! These aren't advertised hands. Goliath laid aside his dish of Italian ham and stroked Mildred's blemished knuckles. There followed a little nervousness about who was to let go first.

Sam Blake was there. "In my heart, I'm red—really red. I believe in socialized medicine and public ownership, the whole works. I think capitalism is lousy. But I tell you that I would go to war and die to defend our present system for no better reason than that I was born into it. Can you dig that, Gol, or doesn't it make sense to you? Because whatever a man personally believes is not as important as being an integral part of his community. That's the only way a man can live with his conscience."

Raymond Tilt was there. Seventeen years old. Tall. Too tall, attenuated, but handsome. Jittery and jumpy. He planned on becoming a master of ceremonies and relent-

lessly told jokes over a portable loud-speaker like those carried by the Salvation Army.

Horace Trench was there representing his four-year-old daughter Millikins. Of fish she would eat only lobster and smoked salmon. Of dolls she would have only silken-haired ones that spoke. Of pets she would have only a chihuahua or Persian cat. And of fathers she would have only him who would have a daughter with the most refined and elegant tastes. Her mother, Goliath knew, would as soon have served her rag dolls, sardines, mutts and alley cats. To hear Horace speak of his wife's thrifty tastes or his daughter's extravagant ones led Goliath into a world where parsimony and prodigality were both absolute virtues. And not only were these qualities superlative—no, no! They were unique to those in whom they obtained among the Trenches. If Millikins loved lobster, it was implied that all the rest of the world were herring-eaters.

Goliath was almost no longer there. Why did freedom always happen too late? Too late to do more than offer a choice of slaveries? One was caught, and then one remembered freedom, the repellent servile mind toiled its futile way into what it believed was action, choices, like a city in revolution. One fought the old regime or the new regime or hid oneself or flew to church to pray for the end of madness or committed suicide or stood in the streets rejoicing from the bottom of some abominable hatred. While the free men, the *truly* free—those who were slaves to other things—went on cobbling or eating or making love until their heads were chopped off.

"If you *are* determined to go, Goliath," said Mildred Trench, "would you be an angel and look in across the street to see how our baby-sitter is doing? Sometimes she has trouble with Millikins and is too proud to call us. If

Millikins is up, you make the sitter phone over here at once, okay?"

Goliath had barely reached the road when he heard someone coming after him. Turning, he saw Mrs. Tilt's son, Raymond.

"I guess you weren't having much fun," said the boy. "But don't go yet anyhow."

This was the first time Raymond had ever spoken a full sentence to him. Goliath suspected he was drunk and, anxious to be rid of him, said: "I'm just going over to see Mildred's baby-sitter. I'll be right back."

Though he continued walking alongside Goliath, Raymond made no further remark until they reached the Trenches' porch. "I'll wait for you outside."

Millikins was up, nightgown raised and eyes rolling, singing a song for her sitter when Goliath opened the door. Seeing him, she came flying across the living room, threw her arms around his thighs and pressed her cheek against his crotch.

"Uncle Goliath, Uncle Goliath! I'm so glad to see you!"

Only one thing prevented him from sickening: Millikin's cheek was applying an unusual pressure combined with a curious rubbing. Since the last time he'd seen her, she'd become interested in sex. Something natural was expressing itself! He bent to embrace the child with more affection than she was showing him. For her, he was not even there; this he saw in her beautiful cold brown eyes. He was an experiment in genitalia, and a stage prop calling for the exhibition of unfelt emotions. Of such is the Kingdom of God, Goliath thought sadly. Millikins caught his glance, and he was convinced that she saw what he was seeing. He was so certain of this that he had to look away. One day her eyes would flicker at him with blind despite

for having witnessed and understood her long-forgotten hypocrisy. She knew he knew, and what was worse, it was looped in the mind's infinite circle: she knew he knew she knew. She did not attempt to deceive herself—merely everyone else. She did not perhaps know why she did this, but she knew it pleased her parents and that they were incapable of distinguishing her deceit. As she grew up, as she gained experience, wisdom and age, gradually, imperceptibly, comprehension would go out of her eyes, and all the deceit would be the only thing she was—and she would be obliged to believe in it. It would be herself! O horror, Goliath shuddered, the things that are oneself! A man, I, is, am a myriad scorching shadows upon a truth as tender and turbulent as birth. Tear, smash, extinguish, annihilate shadow after shadow until one finds the disbelieving eyes in the head of the truth: a parched and shriveled dwarf roasting away in the self's Inferno.

Without having spoken a word to either Millikins or her sitter, Goliath freed himself, turned, fled from the house, and would have run all the way to the station had not Raymond Tilt called to him loudly, a voice of evident pain and longing: "I'm here, in the pergola."

Overjoyed, Goliath rushed to him, obviously frightening the boy, for when he took his hand, Raymond pulled it away.

Goliath contained himself. "It's all right," he said soothingly and took Raymond's hand again. "You know it's all right, or you wouldn't have come after me."

A little coyness followed, but presently Raymond agreed, yes, it was all right.

When they were about to leave, the boy, who had been long silent except to ask Goliath about the X on his belly, suddenly readopted his master-of-ceremonies man-

ner. "Whad you say your name was? I always likes ter get their names afterwards."

Goliath smiled. "And I thought it was the first time."

"The first time! Listen to her, just listen to her! That wasn't even the first time *today*. Gawd, I'm a regular nymphomaniac, full of tricks—did I say *tricks*?" He was just the thing for television, Goliath decided. "But don't get me wrong—no sir, don't get me wrong—I'm not one of them there pansy-fellers. No sir, I'm strictly bisexual: I like soldiers *and* sailors."

When they reached the road, Goliath paused, meaning to tell Raymond good-bye. But the boy spoke first:

"You're sweet."

Goliath said nothing.

"Can you come again? I can. I mean, would you like to stay with me tonight? The old gargoyle's so plastered she'll sleep until noon and never know. I've done it before. We can reverse if you like, it's all the same to me. You go on up first and I'll meet you in ten minutes. My room's last on the right, or from the back stairway it's first on the left. O anyway you'll know it's mine, won't you, from the way it smells."

THE MAN

He lay in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night. Nettles of colorless hair grew from his ears and nostrils. Thick grey brows winged like antennae over the twin crescents of snot that were his half-closed eyes. The white lips sprawled with sleeping breath. Goliath lifted him, partly dragged, partly walked him.

Goliath stopped, suddenly incredulous of the weight at the right side of his body. Turning, he saw the man's

pale face, was startled by it, and his heart went low with pity for the stupefied stranger. Why am I doing this, Goliath asked himself, and compassionately stroked the three-day beard that spiked from the man's jowls. It was himself he stroked, himself he carried, himself he pitied, and knowing this his eyes went full of tears. Yet he did not pity himself. He pitied the man who was himself. Why am I doing this, Goliath asked the pale face that caressed his own. Because I am Goliath, he replied, and he continued along the street in tears, dragging his imperative.

From the Phoenix to the Unnamable, Impossibly Beautiful Wild Bird

Let me tell you first of all what *usually* happens, what has been happening for the last four years.

Mario telephones me, and before I can say hello into the receiver, he speaks, and pettishly: “John, I’m calling from the bar on your corner and I’m coming right up. Don’t tell me you’re just going out or—I-don’t-care-what! And if you’re expecting anyone, you might as well phone and cancel it!”

“The truth is, Mario . . .” I begin, and then pause, my words and my silence being a necessary part of the ritual, for what would be the point of his bullying me if I invariably submitted at once? And he must bully of course, because otherwise he would have to ask, and that would be an admission of his *wanting* rather than of my *obligation*. It is always like this when three or four times a year some minor catastrophe—unpaid rent, trouble with the police on account of a fight or drunken driving, trouble with his wife (unmentioned, oh unmentioned, but nonetheless obvious), the death of a distant relative (death still terrifies him, is heavy in his poetry)—makes the impetus for our

meeting come from him, and I know I am not altogether innocent: I begin by saying "the truth is . . ." when usually I intend to lie, and to let him know that I am lying. Why do I never finish telling him what the truth is, thereby treating him like an equal? Why, when it is so, can I never say, "I have an appointment, Mario, but if it's important that you see me—" Because he would probably grunt, sneer out a phrase about the unimportance of his call, hang up and—what? Curse? Rage? Weep? Be totally indifferent? What does the younger man do when the older finally relinquishes their inequality, resigns his birthright? I have never dared find out; I suppose I am still too fond of Mario to challenge the status quo; I dare not upset the delicate unbalance.

"Well, the truth is, I was—yes . . . well, oh well, Mario, I was planning to stay home tonight anyway."

"No one else will be there?"

"No one. Is Amy with you?"

He ignores my question which is, in any case, superfluous, since when he comes to see me, he always comes alone, only partly because I am an easier touch than I would be with his wife around, but also because he simply wants to come alone, and having a reason to see me at all, he has nothing to hide from Amy (and can hide everything from himself). Besides, hypocrisy is not one of Amy's virtues, and there is nothing powerful enough to make her *really* want to visit me.

"In a minute then," he says, hanging up.

It is no minute, but nearly an hour, as I have learned to anticipate, for more likely than not he has been telephoning from his apartment and not from the bar on my corner. Although refusal has never played a part in our ritual, Mario always acts on its possibility, and he would not expose himself to the indignity of being turned away prac-

tically at my doorstep. He acts so that refusal would cost me this double anguish: of having failed in my obligation to him and of having done so while imagining he was nearly in my apartment. And he offers himself this double solace: he has ordered, not asked, and he hasn't even budged from his own living room. Yes, it irritates me, but as I say, I cannot plead innocence. And finally, when he arrives, he arrives storming with whatever pretext has brought him—and he rants and rages without pause, thank God, for silence is always pushing up against us, silence and stillness and being alone together here where we spent five years.

My approach to him is different and more frequent, but hardly less devious. We cannot merely want to see each other; it has to be a falling together in spite of ourselves. Every couple of months, I stop by at their apartment: "I was in the neighborhood, over at Fanny Blah's or Jane Someone's or"—daring to throw in a man's name and embarrassing no one more than myself—"Pete So-and-so's, and I thought I'd drop in and see how you were getting along." And I act as though out of a sense of duty, like a rich old uncle, polite, probably really pompous and patronizing: at least I see this clearly scored in Amy's eyes, in those stunning cold and hot brown eyes that occasionally flash denials of the utter vacuity of her thoughts, the unbelievable meanness of her feelings. (She despises me not only because of the years Mario and I spent together, but because she despises anyone who might have a claim on him; she has torn him away from his mother and most of his friends. And I loathe Amy not only because of the years Mario and I spent together but because I would loathe anyone who had shackled his free soul and turned him into a slave, a cook, a charwoman, an impresario for her pretences at ballet, and for whom she does nothing in return—never anything in return, not even during that winter he

had pneumonia when she did no more than borrow money from his friends, those from whom she had alienated him.)

Our evenings together, when I have fathered them, begin coolly and awkwardly: I ask a few questions, offer some gratuitous advice: "Are you still at that Spanish restaurant, Mario? . . . How goes the poetry? . . . My office has a new account with a paint house; your walls could do with a fresh coat and I could get you the paint for next to nothing." (Amy seeks out Mario's eyes for an exchange he will not grant her. He blushes—for whom? Is it for her who doesn't trouble to disguise her feelings, or for me, who act like a fool in front of his wife? I can imagine how Amy's shrill voice will tear me to shreds when I've left.) Mario, on the other hand, asks me nothing, offers me no counsel; instead he swaggers and brags, shows me his latest poems, tells me—lest I do not know!—how extraordinary they are, brings out periodicals in which they have been printed, repeats the flattering comments they have evoked from strangers or from poets better known than himself. With other people, Mario would hide his vanity, with me he flaunts it, since it is beside the point. The pretexts are unimportant, for ultimately our spirits begin reaching outward; with hands of ancient love we seem to stroke each other's face. I am proud of his tiny accomplishments. He is actually interested in my idiotic criticisms. We allow ourselves to feel as we never can alone there in my, our, apartment where the dangerous past now hangs limp and unmentionable and to which, in any case, he comes only when bombarded by a hysteria that can keep the smoke thick between us. But here, in his home, in the present, under Amy's eyes, we are free. Though not for very long. Because something happens, as if the warm glow between us were merely the outermost wave of a holocaust. I grow presently more and more aware that, inexorably, we must

speak only of him, that *I* can never enter our conversations. Yet how can I speak of myself when in Mario's presence I feel inarticulate or, worse, a bore? How can I compete with the opulence of his energy, the mythology of his violent emotions? My job seems dull, my life in general a pathetic submission to the tiresome and commonplace—a tame, lusterless old bachelor, aged thirty-five, who assumes the role of ascetic in order not to remind the so-happily-young-marrieds of the nature of his love affairs and also, yes, yes, in order to keep Mario wondering . . . if he wonders. I become bitter, and though we go on talking of what concerns him, my tone changes. I speak of other poets, and praise them flamboyantly. I speak of the minute number of contemporary writers whose work will last out the century. He grows angry. Our souls recede. The claws of ancient hatred strike through the hands of ancient love, and we are as powerless as executioners. We begin to hack at each other in the most intimate way. With what is behind us, our resources for attack, while trivial, are inexhaustible, and we use them carefully aimed. I enter. *I. I!* My life, my job, my love affairs enter blowing trumpets; they are no longer dull, they are spectacularly, gigantically, horrendously dull. It is he who says so, not I—though they are there, driving me on against him. Mario's braggadocio, his waiting job, his drunken brawls, his impecuniousness, his poetry, all become childish and maudlin, and get from me a somewhat Freudian workover—"you were mama's darling . . . you're retreating from reality," et cetera. So, while Amy sits in scornful, supercilious silence, or finally, with evident contempt, goes into her little studio to turn on the tape recorder and practice her dance, the pair of us fight, sometimes for hours, until—conscious of the evening ending, and that things must be mended if there is to be a next time and not a six-month breach as once there was—we

begin to make up. Not explicitly, of course. We simply move from ourselves to the world around us: fresh coffee, another whisky, knocking over an ashtray, suddenly starving for a hamburger. And when I've gone, though I continue simmering and vowing never again to duplicate this scene, I feel each time somehow exalted—as if, again, for once, once more, oh Lord, I've really *lived*.

* * *

But this is not how it was last night. He did away with all the rituals at once by crying over the telephone: "Johnnie! Johnnie!" He hadn't called me Johnnie in four years, and I was too shocked to speak. "Please come over, Johnnie. Please, please come to me. Will you come? Do you hear me, Johnnie?"

"Yes, I do, Mario. What is it?"

"Please just come. I'll die if you don't come right away."

"Are you all right? Is Amy—"

"Yes, yes, please come!"

"But, Mario, tell me—"

"Stop *talking*, Johnnie! I *need* you." And he hung up.

I put on my overcoat and went downstairs into a faint lazy snowfall and took a taxi to Cornelia Street. Up four flights of stone stairs with my hand on an iron banister. He stood in the doorway looking handsome and agonized, his shirt open at the throat where the black curling hair reached from his chest nearly to his Adam's apple. I hadn't seen him without a tie since the day he left me. It flattered me that he continually acknowledged my susceptibility to that region of his body by keeping his collar closed in my presence and wearing a tie, like a wedding band or a chastity belt.

He made no move to let me in.

“She’s gone,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s left me.”

How calm I was, how marvelously cool! “She’ll be back,” I said confidently, nodding my head.

“Oh, John . . . I don’t know.”

“Well, I know. She’ll be back.” My voice was even, faintly disgusted.

“You really think so?” he asked gravely.

“Yes, and so do you. Can I come in now—it’s cold in this hall.”

He lifted his shoulders high and raised his eyes, then relaxed and moved aside. I went on in to the living room which was fairly ordered, or no more disordered than usual —Amy loves to point out that it is Mario who does the housekeeping; *he* does it, he who used to let mountains of soiled clothes and dirty dishes grow indifferently around him until, exasperated, I would tear them away—no signs of anguish in the room except the smell of whisky and a dry delicious trace of mar’huana.

“What are you sniffing about?” he asked. “I had a couple of sticks I smoked on and off all day. It didn’t help much.” While I took off my coat, he flung himself down on the sofa, rubbed his eyes. “The liquor’s over there on the window sill.”

There were two coffee cups beside the bottle and I began pouring into both of them. “I suppose you’ll want some too, though you’ve probably had enough.”

“Yes, daddy, I’ve had enough, but I want some more.”

“I’m not your daddy,” I told him sharply.

“No.” His voice was gentle. “I know you’re not.”

I brought him his drink, then went across the room

and sat down on the chair in the far corner where Amy usually sits observing us. "When did she go?"

"This morning. That is, it was official this morning, but she left last night."

"Alone?"

"That would be just like her, wouldn't it?"

It sounded almost as though he meant for me to pause, reflect, and answer the question, but I was wary of being lured into any comment because I have noticed that whatever one says about Amy—other, perhaps, than in praise of her beauty—seems to make Mario freeze, and I mean compliments as well as censure. Everything she is and does is somehow too private, too personal, to be mentioned or discussed: only her face is public—and until last night this was the only one of her attributes he'd ever referred to.

"You mean she didn't leave alone?"

"No, of course not. Who ever leaves alone?" He raised his head to sip the whisky, then, looking up at me, he whispered: "Forgive me, Johnnie, I love her so much."

I nodded, hurt, but yet moved by the boyishness, the intimacy, the vulnerability that the diminutive gave to the never-before-made confession. "I know you do . . . I mean, I know how much love there is in you. And I also know she couldn't live without you. That winter you had pneumonia—do you remember what she was like? Everything went slipping out from under her. She was in panic."

"Oh, John, she's so lovely!" he exclaimed; and then, after a moment: "Sometimes, at night, I wake up on account of a dream—I still have nightmares—and I turn on the lamp and take a cigarette." He hesitated, somewhat confused. Was he thinking, as I was, that I had been the one with nightmares, never him, that I was the one who broke from tormented sleep to turn on the lamp and take a cigarette? "She never wakes; she never has bad dreams; she

sleeps like a child—as deeply, as innocently, a perfect spirit. And while I smoke I watch her face, and all my terrors disappear, and instead I begin to think I must be crazy, imagining there's something that beautiful lying there beside me. I still don't own her beauty—it's still away, outside me, waiting to be possessed, not a habit, always unexpected, astonishing. She's better looking asleep than awake. You wouldn't believe that because you think it's all in her eyes."

"No, not only. You're not remembering what I said."

"I remember perfectly well: that her eyes gave depth to her face, that they seemed to reach straight to her soul. If it weren't for them, you said, she'd be any other wax beauty."

"Wax wasn't the word I used," I murmured guiltily.

He shook his head, and when he spoke his tone was weary, almost a sigh. "Do you think I care what you or anyone thinks of Amy? I know she antagonizes everyone, that she alienates everyone. So what?" He closed his eyes. "I need no one else and want no one else."

"And you have no one else," I reminded him.

"I will die without her."

"You won't have to die, I assure you."

Mario looked at me. "How smug you sound! How do you know whether she'll be back or not? What do you know about what goes on inside us, between us? Wasn't everyone telling you that I'd come back after I left?"

"Yes." I was beginning to feel uneasy.

"But you knew I wasn't going to," he said with unexpected hatred.

"I hoped you would. You know how hard I tried to get you back."

"How *hard* you tried!" he sneered. "You phoned me twice."

"I have my pride, Mario."

"The way you can lie! You *knew* I wasn't coming back."

I nodded. "Yes, I knew you were gone for good."

"God!" he cried out and sat up abruptly. "How can there be such a pain?" Hugging himself, he got to his feet. "Does God keep pain like this in reserve for special occasions like being left?" He dropped his arms to his sides and wandered around the room absently. "Oh yes, liquor. Want some more?"

I wanted some more, but I didn't want him to bring it to me, to stand beside me curving his back and shoulders while he poured from the bottle into the cup. So I said no.

His drink refreshed, he returned to the sofa, lay down once again.

Presently, he asked: "Today is the ninth of February, isn't it? In ten days it will be four years that Amy and I were married. The day after tomorrow will be four years that we met. You didn't know we only knew each other a week?"

It was difficult maintaining my calm, but what there was of it was enough for Mario, who can never see through my coolness. "I supposed something like that. No, that isn't true: I imagined it was more like a couple of months."

"You thought all those last awful weeks were on account of Amy?"

"It seemed likely that some outside interest was making those weeks more awful than they need have been."

"You never understood me," he said slowly, with disgust. "Well, what difference does it make now anyway?"

"It wasn't me who brought it up."

"Amy didn't end things between us: she made life possible for me again. The way she looked then, that night

she came into the diner where I was working! Later on she told me she'd come in often before, but somehow I hadn't noticed her. I'd hardly noticed anyone, you know, for years. Except you. But then that night, the eleventh of February, she came in surrounded by boys. They were all students, and it seemed to me that every one of them was in love with her. If they weren't, they were insane! I felt, as soon as I looked at her, I felt I was going to fall into her eyes—and I'd never liked brown eyes before. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold and there was snow melting in that thick black hair. She was so happy and so vain, so vain. Remember, John, how you once said that it was vanity that made the difference between who was pretty and who was beautiful? It's true. And was she ever vain!"

"And so were you!"

He shook his head and spoke bitterly. "No, not any more I wasn't. I was crushed. Thoroughly. Beaten. By life with the charming but withering Johnnycake. Those weeks before I met Amy, I wasn't having an affair with anyone. I was just so unhappy that I'd wander around the streets at night after work—not the way you do, with one eye always on the traffic, but with my head down and that perpetual burden of misery on my shoulders. I didn't want to go back to that agony of our life, that mind of yours sitting there and reasoning the love out of my bones, eating at me, making me feel like a fool all the time for wanting you so much. Oh, the contempt you had for me! But why not? What could you do but despise anyone stupid enough to love you?"

"Yes," I said, without smiling. "Come to think of it, what else could I do?"

He frowned at me, but I knew he couldn't decide whether or not I was serious. After a moment, with something like spite in his voice, he went on talking.

“But then Amy walked into the diner. Just like that. So simply. Enter the flutist, piping a tune, and the heart follows after, laughing and tripping. She walked into the diner and I was reborn. I was the phoenix, risen from my death, and when I served her her dinner—which, you’re certainly thinking, I’ve never stopped doing—when I put the plate in front of her, I said, ‘You’re beautiful.’ She laughed with real delight, not the way she laughs nowadays with that harshness in her throat, but without restraint she laughed, with pleasure in herself. She said: ‘I know I am.’ And there was no doubt about it: she knew she was. But where is her vanity now?”

“Is she less beautiful because she’s less vain?”

“According to you—”

“Why do you pretend to be so naïve? I said that when I first met you, and you know there was a certain amount of calculating flattery involved. But as for the part I believed: many things happened after to make me change my mind. I can see beauty where there is no self-love.”

He shook his head. “When I met Amy, she was like a flower or a glorious wild bird—all form, no meaning, no content. But now, you know . . . no, you don’t know. Now she’s all pain. She’s filled up with four years of dancing all day and most of the night alone in the other room with nothing but that tape recorder. She’s filled up with me and herself, with bitterness.”

“When someone you love is suffering, they usually seem more beautiful,” I said. “At least I’ve found it that way.”

“You would! Because you’re so ice-cold and cruel. That’s why you think Amy’s eyes save her, because they reach right into her sorrow: they’re the lie in the wild bird. She’s done well to leave me. I don’t deserve her. I never have. She’s so pure, so genuine. Her feelings are so honest

and so simple. Life is so simple for Amy, the way it is for a child. All she wants is to be loved twenty-four hours a day—and I do, I do, I swear I do. But there are other things for me as well—poetry, other people, even you, old relic. What she wants is for us to be locked up in a tower on a mountain on a desert island. She thinks of us as Prince and Princess Charming. Anyone who comes near me makes her jealous, people who obviously couldn't be more than friends—older women, and men. She's suggested a dozen times that you and I are still sleeping together. She doesn't mean it, of course, but she has to say it's sex since it seems so ridiculous to be jealous of friends. She cuts me off so much I could die of suffocation. I beat her up yesterday: it was the first time."

"I don't like hearing that," I said, sounding pompous.

"Of course not!" he cried impatiently. "You wouldn't give up all your advantages by such a show of passion. She was going out to meet that Barker Bishop—I think you met him here once, a composer, about forty, I guess. You'd get along well with him; he too never reveals a trick. He pretends to be encouraging Amy's dancing, but I knew he was after her ass. And he's been coming around nearly every night lately with his devotion to young artists sticking out in front of him. She gets all caught up in his flattery. Agh, you ought to see her melt! Maybe I shouldn't have hit her, but she didn't seem to care that I was going through hell. She just kept saying, 'Why won't you let me have friends?' Can you imagine: let *her* have friends! How I'd rejoice if she had some friends, someone to get her off my back occasionally. But why does she only get friendly with men who are hot for her?" He sat up on the sofa and began playing with his hair. "So I beat the shit out of her. I wanted to kill her. And while I was socking and punching, I kept shouting, 'That's for the last four years.' Why

wouldn't she see my anguish? She didn't deign to recognize it. She lay there on the floor and let me beat her, and then when I was worn out, she got up calm as could be and washed herself and combed her hair and began making up her face. I hadn't touched her face. I'd been careful even in my fury not to touch her holy face. I followed her around the apartment, neither of us talking, and then I stood at the bedroom door while she sat on the bed making up her face in that calm frozen way. Oh, the cold way she can be when I'm ready to tear the walls apart or smash the windows. She sits like a work of art. She sits without trembling and makes up her face. I wanted to kill her! Even though I was exhausted from the beating I'd given her, when I stood in the doorway watching her make up her face, I wanted to put my hands around that delicate perfect neck and snap it like chicken bones. God, how I wanted to destroy her. I thought: this is the moment our love has been leading to. This is why we were mated. And Amy knows it as well as I do. She knows I'm supposed to kill her, just as Christ knew Judas was supposed to betray Him. They chose each other to act out murder. It's in the nature of things. Last summer, we were lying on the beach one day, and for no apparent reason Amy said: 'Mario, you don't want to kill me any more. Does that mean you don't love me any more?' I laughed and said she was ridiculous, but I felt sick. The truth of it made my skin crawl. So I stood at the bedroom door, and I told myself: if you don't do it now, you will never do it. And of course I didn't do it. I became no better than you: I reasoned. I thought things over. Like that afternoon I told you I was leaving you, and you gave me *reasons* why I shouldn't. You were always ready to improve things with your mind. If we talked matters over, it would be all right. Talk and reasons! I taunted you and said I was going to marry Amy, and I

waited for you to kill me, but you didn't. And I left feeling cheated, just the way I always felt with you. I stood in the doorway and I knew I was reasoning like you, and I was full of contempt for myself. I calculated. I figured the odds. I thought of poetry and being famous and the electric chair and a bad picture of myself in the papers: and I failed to love my Amy properly."

"Oh, Mario, you're still doing the same thing. You minimize every possible feeling by making it all so enormous and operatic."

"Smart, smart Johnnycake. What do you know about enormous feelings? What has your mind ever told you except how wrong everything is?"

I sighed loudly to show him I despaired of making my point, and then I said: "Go on. So she ran away with Barker Bishop, and now you've been left."

"And how glad you are!"

"Is that why you wanted me here—to tell me all this and make me glad?"

"No, no. I'm sorry, Johnnie." He finished his cup of whisky, put it on the coffee table and stretched out once more. "Can't you see it? If I'd killed her, she wouldn't have gone and our love would have been perfect; we would both have died for it. The end of our love would have been the end of our lives. But instead she's with Barker Bishop, though a fat lot of fun she's having out of it with all those bruises on her body. So she went out to meet him last night, and I started getting drunk here, by myself. I knew it was the end. I got drunk and waited, just as if I didn't know it was the end. I got into bed and tried to fall asleep, but I knew the sun would rise this morning and would come through the window and catch me alone in my bed. And that seemed terrible. Oh, yes!" he ex-

claimed with sudden surprise. "There was a fire. At three o'clock in the morning, there was a fire."

"What, here in the apartment?" I asked, looking around dubiously.

"No, in the building next door. But I was in such a state that when I heard the engines screaming outside, I panicked and threw on my coat and rushed downstairs into the street. I stood there with the hordes of beatniks and faggots and Italians from the tenement next door watching all the men and hoses. It wasn't much of a fire—mostly smoke from the cellar. And suddenly I felt happy. I thought: of course, Amy is going to come now. It all fits. There was a lot of smoke but no real fire, and it wasn't even in our building, and Amy is going to come running down the street, terrified that I might have died in the flames. Then she'll see I'm all right, and we'll fly upstairs and cry together and love each other happily forever. But she didn't come, as you know. I had to go upstairs alone. And I couldn't stand it, so I went out looking for her. But all the bars were already closed, and Barker Bishop wasn't home—or he wasn't answering his doorbell. I pretended to myself I didn't know she wasn't coming back, and I wondered what could have become of her. Maybe she was hurt. Maybe she'd been raped or hit by a car. I wondered if I should call the police and report her as missing. I sort of wandered around, all the way up to Chelsea. I passed your house and thought of going up to see you, but instead I went home. And I waited, pretending she'd be back any minute. Oh John, she called me at nine o'clock this morning. She said: 'Mario, I've decided I don't have any affection left for you. I'm leaving you.' He wrinkled his forehead and laughed quietly. "It embarrasses me to repeat it—such an incredibly stupid thing to say. 'I've decided I don't have any affection left for you.' Did you ever hear

anything so absurd, John? When she said that, I nearly lost my temper. I wanted to shout at her: 'How can you be so dumb, Amy? How can you say such asinine things? How can you be so unbelievably stupid?' But I controlled my temper and I burst into tears and wailed, 'My life, my life, don't leave me. I'll die without you.' And she went on to say even stupider things. She said: 'No, I'm going to stay with Barker. We have a great deal in common. He's a composer, after all, and he understands me, Mario. To you, I am nothing but a pretty toy. You don't understand my art. You don't believe in me as an artist. Barker does.'"

In spite of myself, I burst into laughter and said: "You're making this up, Mario."

"I'm not. I swear I'm not. And then she carried on about how Barker is a gentleman. She said: 'He helps me in and out of my coat; he holds doors open for me; he gives me his arm on the street; he pays attention to every word I say. This may not seem important to an intellectual like you, Mario, but it's important to me. You never did things like that except the first couple of weeks we were married. Oh, I'm not *blaming* you. With your psychosexual history, maybe you can't be blamed for not realizing how important it is for a woman to *feel* like a woman.'"

Mario paused and grimaced, his face full of revulsion. "That was Barker Bishop talking through her—my psychosexual history and so on. I can just hear him seducing her last night with: 'A woman like you needs a real man, Amy, a man who appreciates women, and not a man who has been involved with other men, a man who was another man's woman. What do you think he and his friend were doing up there in Chelsea all those years?' My psychosexual history! They make me want to puke—they were talking about my love. They were talking about you.'"

Mario was silent a moment, but I couldn't look at him.

“Oh, John,” he shouted, “how dumb she is! How I despise her! I know you won’t believe me, John, but I never loved her, not for a minute—never, never, not for a second. Knowing me, can you believe I could love anyone that dumb? She never captured my heart, only my imagination. I needed someone so I could get away from you. I needed to fall in love. And Amy looked so right for the part. She was the spit and image of Princess Charming. And I truly believed it would happen. Everything was always just about to happen. In a moment I was going to fall in love again. In a moment that excruciatingly tiresome vain little slut whom I dislike as much as everyone else dislikes her, who grates on my nerves as much as she does on anyone else’s—in a moment she was going to lean out of the tower and show me the magical way across the moat. In a moment she was going to learn how to treat me, how to make love without lying there like a gorgeous rock, how to live with me, how to get off my back and give me some freedom, how not to treat me like a slave so that I have to cook and clean and work for her, how not to want and want and want and want insatiably, devouringly, my eyes on her, my kisses, my every breath, my blood. In a moment. Four years of moments. I’ve done everything for her while she twirls away in her studio pretending she’s a dancer. Twelve hundred days and nights I’ve come barging in on her. I’ve gone flying into her arms with my famished heart crying Princess Charming, Princess Charming! Amy only. Only Amy. Who was I expecting if not Amy? Poor Amy. Poor poor Amy—and poor Mario. I’ve wronged her so terribly, John. When she starts talking to me about anything, anything at all, I feel as if a pair of icy hands were reaching into my belly, squeezing my innards. She walks into a room unexpectedly and a wave of nausea rises in me. She knows I hate her. In the marrow of her bones, in her

hungry sex, she knows it, as I knew it with you. And wasn't that why you surrendered to every one of my whims? God, I'm thinking like you again. Do you see? I watch her and myself the way you used to watch us. Boom Boom Boom the big mind going instead of love. God oh God oh God! No, this is impossible. Everything I've told you is impossible. It's all wrong. Why do I make it all so gigantic? Tell me, John, please, why is my life so frantic and hysterical? Sometimes I think there's nothing inside me but a hideous coldness that I'm trying to hide from myself. I hold on to life by its strings. I keep making noises and singing. Because all the time I'm scared shitless that if I let go for a minute or shut up for a second, everything will appear to be just what it is: rags and silence. Oh God, poor Amy! Poor Amy is crying for me. And she'll never come back, as I never went back to you. Because there's nothing to go back to. Amy left me because she was unloved. Do you know how horrible it is to be unloved, John?"

"You know I do, Mario. I know it well."

"You fraud! You liar! Hypocrite! You evil fraud. You've sat there listening to me cover you with roses just the way I always did and you tell me your vanity suffered when I left. Oh, it was worth the hell of five years with you for the thrill of making you suffer, even if it was only vanity. And you didn't expect you would, did you? You'd been hoping for so long to be done with me, you never stopped to consider how much it might hurt if I did the leaving. You never loved anyone except maybe some dream you haven't told me about, maybe some boy you went to school with who wouldn't let you touch him or some queen you picked up off the street and with whom you spent an hour and by whom you felt yourself scorned the whole time and so you never forgot him." He lifted

himself on his elbow slowly, painfully. "And I—how much I loved you, Johnnycake."

"I loved you too, Sweet Pain," I told him quietly. "But you never believed me."

"Liar! Liar! It was all vanity! Monster of vanity! You wanted me because everyone else did, because I was the youngest and prettiest boy in the bar. So ugly—so ugly, it is. And you kept me because it flattered you to have me crawling after you. But you paid for it by the slow death of the mind working instead of love. You never fooled me; I never fooled myself. It flattered you that I had no life but yours."

I shook my head hopelessly, helplessly. "It isn't true, Mario. How many thousands of times did I beg you to be more independent? I hated your needing me so much. What do you think it was doing to me those last months when you couldn't get into a subway without me, when you couldn't go to the grocer alone, when I could barely get you or myself out of the apartment to go to work?"

"When it was so hard for you to go whoring around because of my watchful eyes."

"No!" I shouted. "I never wanted to whore, only to breathe."

"You never had any feeling for me."

"It was never possible to prove it to you."

"It was never there!"

Already my temper was up; in a moment we would be roaring at each other. "Stop this, Mario! Stop eating at me. I loved you, I loved you."

To my surprise, he smiled and lay back again. Presently, he said: "It's of no importance. It's dead. Get me another drink, will you?"

It was a relief to pull away from the turn the conversation had taken, and I stood up shakily and walked

across the room to the window sill. I carried the bottle to the coffee table and filled Mario's cup.

"Leave it there," he said. "Don't hand it to me. No, I mean leave both the cup and the bottle on the table."

"I'd like to pour myself a drink, if you don't mind."

"Well, I *do* mind . . . but all right, go pour yourself a drink. Then bring it back and leave it here on the table." I could hear a tremble of laughter in his voice. "I mean, bring the bottle back and leave it here on the table."

I did as he asked, then, irritated, stood frowning above him while he smiled, half-closed his eyes and tapped his thumbnail against his teeth. He said: "That's a good, dear, obliging, loving cold fish."

"Your memory must be bad."

"It isn't bad at all. Haven't you noticed I'm not wearing a tie?"

I hesitated. "No, I hadn't."

"Well, now that you have, what are you thinking? What's the great big mind doing?"

"I'm thinking . . . Mario isn't twenty any more."

He made a great effort not to stop smiling. "John isn't twenty-five any more. So?"

"So you're not twenty and I'm not twenty-five. And your wife left you last night."

His eyes opened wide; his thumb moved away from his mouth; and he no longer smiled. "What's your point?"

"No point at all, except . . ." I paused, afraid of exposing myself if I continued.

"Say it, coward! Go on!"

"I wouldn't have you when you're down—or just because you're down. If I were willing to do that, I could have had you any of those times you came up to the apartment."

"Dear, dear me, so sure of yourself, aren't you? So

cocksure!" But his voice was quivering, and I knew that I was right. "You think it would have been that simple?"

"Obviously I think so or I wouldn't have said so."

"The way I remember it, you were always saying things you didn't think—or feel. Get away from me, I don't want you near me. Go away and sit down. I don't like the smell." When I was seated, he said: "It was stupid of me to have phoned you. I was right last night when I passed your house and thought, no, I mustn't go up. All you need is to hear my call and you fly the other way."

"Your call seems to ask so much more than one can humanly give."

"*Humanly give!*!" he sneered. "Where'd you pick that one up? What an ass you are. You belong with those other two who are humping around on my psychosexual history." He rolled his head from side to side. "I feel so alone. And don't tell me something like: basically we're *all* alone. Is she suffering too, do you think? She must be, if I am. You think I'm wrong to connect our feelings? I'm not—we've never really deceived each other. *Ultimately*, we've never deceived each other. With her teeth in my throat and my teeth in hers, how could we avoid one flow of blood? A single flow. Oh, maybe I *am* wrong. Maybe only *my* blood is running out—and she and Barker Bishop are stanching each other's wounds. I suffered when I left you," he said suddenly, imploringly. "I swear, you weren't suffering alone, Johnnie. Your pain made you love me, didn't it? If she came back, I wouldn't turn her away. When the lamb lays itself down on the altar, who would be cruel enough not to kill it? How could anyone with a heart refuse to love and cherish and murder the lamb that puts its sweet naked throat at your mercy? If she came back, we would pretend that she was going to be a great dancer and not that she was whirling around so as not to notice the

hole in her life where the love ought to be. And I would find my way across the moat and up into her tower, and then we would hide from the world, like children. The way you and I were once children—little boys playing hookey from life. Only your mind made you grow up. Do you think I've grown up, John? Is that why she's left me? I thought of that this morning and I went to church. All the way up to St. Pat's. You know why?"

"Yes, I do, Sweet Pain. Because of St. Stanislaus."

"You remembered!"

"I also remember that I called you a fraud because you took as your patron the patron of children. How wrong I was!"

He did not enjoy my saying that. "You don't know how wrong you were! Do you know why I chose St. Stanislaus? How could you? I never told you. Remember, when I was twenty-one we went to Paris for a month? Well, I picked up a boy one night at the Place Stanislas near Montparnasse—oh, look at you blanch, you with your *mille e tre!* And what were you doing that night? You'd ditched me somewhere, as always, but for once it occurred to me not to sit home with my knitting. I didn't do very much. I walked around and around the Place Stanislas with him, a thousand times. It was a beautiful night, and the boy's name was . . . I've forgotten. We had no place to go, no money for a hotel room, so we just walked around and around the square. But he called me 'dear Stanislas.' Are you upset, John?"

"I didn't know about it."

"Does it upset you, now that you know?"

"No," I lied and looked at my watch. It was nearly two o'clock.

"Nothing worth getting upset about happened anyway," he said bitterly. "Except he called me dear Stan-

islas. But it felt like a lot; it made me feel loved. And it had been a long time since I'd felt loved—after all, I'd been living with *you* for over a year. So when we came back to New York and I found the altar to Stanislaus at St. Pat's, I took him as my patron. And then this morning I thought of all that and how Amy and I were like children, and I took the bus up to St. Pat's. Nothing much ever happens to me when I pray to that cold white statue of a boy who died young. But this morning it was different. I went down on my knees and I crossed myself and I listened to women's heels clacking on the cathedral floors. Then suddenly I felt something. I felt celestial disharmony. It's true we were chosen to act out murder. But it's God's will. God wills us to break God's laws. In our black night of hatred and demons and horror, in our violation of God's laws, all the saints and angels acquiesce. God too. He doesn't merely pardon us. He loves us. He is our love. There, beyond the craggy, toothy, tearing, ravaging hordes of darkness, is that bright center, that light—but I've become like you. I think. I can't reach the center for fighting so hard with the demons. I see them all, and I believe I've got to get through them. My hands flail. My tongue wags. My brains scream. My heart breaks. I'm overwhelmed. Instead of merely passing through as I once could, as Amy can. There, in the center of it all, a little outside my reach, is Amy—lying there in the brilliant peaceful center where the demons can never come. For if they could, they would be absorbed into love, and whatever makes evil in this world would have no reason for being."

I stood up and went to the sofa. "Mario, Mario . . ." I said, almost chanting his name.

"You want to go home, don't you?" he asked softly.

"I'm afraid I have to. I've got to be at work on time tomorrow. I have an appointment at—"

“Don’t go.”

“I must. Besides, what if Amy comes back?”

“Stay. Stay with me,” he pleaded.

I shook my head.

“Don’t revenge yourself on me, Johnnie. Feel with me for once. Stay with me. I need you so terribly.”

How lovely his strongly carved face was; and yet it was impossible for me to touch it. “You’d better get some sleep, Mario. Call me at the office when you wake up. I’ll try to get off as early as possible. Maybe you can come uptown and we can walk in the park. Remember how we used to walk in the park during the winter?”

On the street, about twelve blocks from my house, there was a young mulatto leaning against a store window. The snow had let up and it was very cold, but he wore only a leather windbreaker and blue jeans. We talked for a couple of minutes, and the conversation, like all such, was too trivial to record. Before I realized what I was doing, I had put my hand to his face and said: “In this violation of God’s laws, all the saints and angels acquiesce.”

He smiled rather nervously. “That must be Yeats. I’m *sure* I know the poem.” Closing his eyes, he pretended to struggle for the title.

“No, it’s not—” But, feeling sorry for him, I interrupted myself. “Yes, of course it’s Yeats. I was getting it mixed up with Rilke—the angels, you know.”

He rolled his eyes and said archly: “I should say . . . those *angels!*”

“Will you come home with me?”

“It’s awfully late. Where do you live?”

“Only a few streets away—five or six blocks,” I lied, worried he might find the distance too great. “We could take a cab.”

“No, I adore walking.”

We walked, and exhausted three topics of conversation in three blocks. Movies. Theater. Books. The fourth block passed in silence. Eight more to go and nothing to talk about. Anxiously, I tried discussing advertising techniques. Hopeless. The sixth block passed in silence. It was no use, and finally, to relieve my desperation, I said: “It’s always so awful, the walk home—isn’t it?”

“No,” he said, surprised. “I told you: I adore walking.”

I had to laugh aloud. I had to laugh aloud and hug the indifferent stranger to my side.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel

The trailer of Sebastian Torks came down route 17 in a drizzle and entered Afton in the rain. Drawn by two grey geldings whose lank and knockkneed legs staggered slowly across the puddled roads, the pale blue trailer swayed through the suburbs and along the rim of Afton University, past the drenched still campus toward the center of the town: Market Square.

There, sitting on the lip of his wagon, Sebastian Torks reined his horses to a stop and looked around. The three sides of the square that he could see were set evenly with small frame houses, all their windows hung with crochet-curtains, some unornamented, some woven with flowerpots, a gentle dragon, a family initial. Sebastian Torks nodded several times toward the houses, then dismounted and tied the end of the reins to a large rusty ring cemented into the square. Occasional students, passing by, stopped a moment to observe the newcomer; but he did not notice them, and they, lifting the collars of their mackintoshes a bit higher, went on.

Although the rain was still heavy, Sebastian Torks did not enter his trailer but instead remounted the sill behind the horses and sat there, his pale eyes pensive. He was a fair young man, and the clothes he wore were all of a flat shiny tan suede, except his thick and ordinary shoes. A well-trimmed beard and moustache covered most of his face

and neck; and although it usually fuzzed outward, today, soaked with rain, the hair was limp and slick and dark, and consequently emphasized, as it seldom did, the red and small but fleshy mouth.

Into this mouth he now pushed a caramel, chewing it languidly under the dripping eaves of his trailer.

Chiming in waves, the doorbell whirled Gwendolyn in and out of sleep, bringing her a dozen times to the edge of a dream, then snatching her back. *Go away, Eddie*, she thought, and swung into sleep, then out again, the movement nauseating her.

“Go away, Eddie,” she said aloud, and remembered vaguely that there was something important about this day. The memory, while unclear, drew her up to a sitting position. Head slumped forward, her suddenly open eyes stared down at the swell of breast, and then, with an interest that rarely came to her any more, she watched as her belly appeared to begin flowing downwards into her loins.

“Go away, Eddie,” she repeated as the chiming continued.

“Please open. I am not Eh-dee.” His voice was calm, his accent mouthy and peculiar.

“Who are you?” Gwendolyn asked without curiosity.

“Please open. You do not perhaps know me?”

“Go away. I don’t want to know you.”

“Please open. I have come at three days ago, and then at every day ago before for over a week, and I have rung but without response. You must please open.”

He was no longer pushing the doorbell and, since she had slumped back from the sitting position, she considered falling asleep. But, turning her head, she gazed out the

window and saw that it was day—a brownish day with rain slashing the trees.

“Please open.”

“O, all right.” Bringing her legs over the edge of the day bed she bent toward them, her hands sliding along the warm calves. She remembered the Forgetfulness Drops, but she had forgotten where they were or whether she had taken any the evening before; somehow this was important, for without them she would go to the door naked and thus shock the strange man who waited.

“I have nothing on,” said Gwendolyn, and so saying realized she must have taken the Forgetfulness Drops.

“Have you nothing to wear—a robe, a kimono?”

“Yes.” And quietly she added: “It’s pure silk.”

As she rose, the ball of her foot stepped into the wide candle stump burning on the floor, the hot wax oozing between her toes and solidifying at once. Soothing her foot on the cold floor she leaned over to examine the candle: it might still have burned another hour, which meant that it was not yet noon. Finally she limped to the wardrobe and pulled a kimono out, rippling the yellow silk before her. She went into it as into water.

“Please open.”

“Yes,” she said, and let him in.

He was an Oriental: a short young man with dark skin and long eyes of hot-black. His body was slight in a mackintosh, and in his oddly anciently wrinkled fingers he turned the damp brim of a hat.

“You do not know me perhaps?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe from the university—it that it?”

“Yes. I am told you are ill, Glendolyn.”

“*Glendolyn . . .*” she mimicked, laughing. “I’m not ill.”

“Possibly I am misinformed, but I think not. Until

three days ago I have come to you often and knocked without response."

"I slept during the day then. Now I sleep at night."

"It is three weeks since you have been to classes."

"So?"

"I am told you are ill."

"Well, you am told wrong. I'm not ill—I'm dead."

She smiled and shook herself slightly in order to feel the silk flow along her body. "How did you find out?"

"I am told by Eh-dee."

"Eddie Forrest?"

"He has told me he is not longer your paramour for you are contagiously ill and therefore isolated."

"That's funny," she said. "He doesn't see, so he makes up stories. Doesn't he see?" And remembering that Eddie Forrest did not see, she remembered him who did, and the importance of the day was at once clear to her. "Today's the twenty-fourth, isn't it?" she asked the Oriental.

"Yes."

"Do you know if Sebastian Torks is in Afton yet?"

"I regret, I do not know the person."

"He's a prophet with a soft beard and a pair of horses, and he travels with a trailer."

"Ah yes indeed. While coming on my way here I saw him in Market Sklare."

"You did? O that's wonderful." Pausing, she looked into the Oriental's black eyes: she did not like them. She preferred pale eyes, eyes that swirled in depth and absence. This man's eyes were too much present. "What do you want?"

"Perhaps *you* want something. Any assistance . . ."

"No."

"Should you—"

"I won't."

"You would like me to leave now?" he said sadly.

"Yes."

"But I may come again? I may help you if you need?"

"Aren't you crazy to think you can help me! Why should you want to? Do you feel sorry for me?" She was not offended, nor was she even curious; her questions lately were more a result of habit than interest, and emotion she had very rarely known.

"Sometimes I have watched you," he said. "And you are very beautiful. Please take no offense: we Easterners are often not reserved as you. But now you are without a paramour . . ."

Gwendolyn was laughing again, the sound of it rising rich and loose from her throat.

"Please do not laugh at me."

"O but don't you see? What you want is so funny!"

"It is funny? Perhaps you have never loved someone."

"Yes, I have." She smoothed a finger across her mouth.

"I do. Now go away; you must leave."

"You will permit me to come again?"

"I don't know. Maybe—if I feel like it."

"You must say you will."

"All right, I will." She pulled the hat from his hands and crushed it backwards on his head. "Goodbye, goodbye. You look so funny. Goodbye!"

When he was gone she slid the yellow silk kimono down her body, letting it lie delicate and luminous upon the floor, and she sank once more to the day-bed not to sleep but to think of Sebastian Torks. Her fingers, while she thought, wove through her long blonde hair, bringing it over her shoulders and to her breasts: and she offered her full round dying body to Sebastian Torks.

She had met him in Chicago last summer, had seen first of all his bearded face in the window of the skyblue

trailer which was standing beneath the station of the elevated-lines. But he did not see Gwendolyn approach his door for he was staring across the thoroughfare, over to a triangle of public park which was deserted but for a boy and girl who sat kissing on a bench; his eyes above the beard were round and hollow, at once light and dim, somehow encompassing in vision what was beyond Gwendolyn's sight. Within the trailer she was repelled by the furnishings and by the clairvoyant himself. Sebastian Torks, like many other people, gave her the impression that his feet were unwashed and his toilet habits improper. He had read her tarot (crossed and crowned with swords), had stroked his too-soft fingers over the lines of her palm, had wept with looking in a crystal-ball: his prophecies were filled with doom and love affairs. In the end he took her birth-date and her address and promised to send, as soon as possible, an astrological reading of her future. She gave him forty dollars when she left.

The next week end when she returned to Afton, the horoscope was already waiting. With it was a short neatly hand-printed note:

I will be in Afton on the twenty-fourth of October.
If you want we can go into extra consultations at
that time.

S. T.

Her future in the stars was much the same as it had been in her palm, the tarot, and the crystal-ball: it promised love, good news from home, and Gwendolyn's death at an early age. She put the papers in a bureau drawer and for almost two months did not think of Sebastian Torks.

Death, eventual and unscheduled, did not frighten Gwendolyn; like most personal qualities it had become, when she stopped to consider it, unreal, fantastic. For, as

doctors found soon after her birth, she was born with the heart of a woman of eighty. Living carefully, her parents were told, and by avoiding major shocks, this pale fat child might survive a decade, perhaps by some miracle even two. So Gwendolyn was schooled, by a mother clever and direct, in calm and coldbloodedness; she was taught that catastrophe and destruction, the rapid horrible passing of all, were the elements of the external world; she learned not merely to express but to experience a minimum of concern. Her parents labored to create in her a wall of cold philosophy, and so successful were they that when their much younger hearts collapsed, their daughter's aged one was only slightly moved.

At fifteen, soon after the death of her father and just before the death of her mother, Gwendolyn inherited a fortune. She was never certain whose it had been before nor why it had come to her, but she accepted it calmly and spent it glibly. She traveled a great deal and shopped continually, transporting European ruins to American warehouses; as often as she remembered, and this was seldom, she visited a hospital and had the most famous doctors in the world listen to her heart. "You understand," they invariably said. "At this moment it works perfectly; the question is—how long? We would strongly advise a lot of rest and complete avoidance . . ."

Her desire for an education was sudden and, although a lack of preparation made her ineligible for undergraduate work, this was overcome by a donation to Afton University where she enrolled as a freshman the year before she met Sebastian Torks in Chicago. Her life through that first year was orderly and even at the beginning of this new semester nothing had changed—for three weeks: and then one evening the pains began, first in her limbs as if they had fallen asleep and then a bubbling turnover sensation in

her chest and then a faint wheezing ache which cried from incredible depths. She flew to New York the following week end and saw five specialists (one of whom had come from Munich at her request); and she was told among grave faces and cigar smoke that her heart could not endure another year.

It was in the airplane on the way back to Afton that Gwendolyn for the first time in her life made rapid transient contact with the world outside. Like a hot shriek of flame was the realization that she was not immune to the catastrophic and the horrible to which the rest of the living were subject. When she returned she shut off all the rooms in her rented house but the fair-sized central one with the day-bed, and there she sat for three days wondering why her mother had prepared her to face everything but her own potential and her own death. And death she did not face: she tried to tear it with her fingernails, to thrust her unblemished white back against it, to butt it with her golden head—but she did not know how to face it. For the wall of cold philosophy, having been fingered by the ego, was fallen. The mildness of her childhood and youth evaporated leaving a spirit of violent exaggeration, more flexible than the philosophic wall, which she bent inward and outward, flinging and flailing her emotions, destroying friendships, a love affair, and many rare expensive objects around her room. Ultimately she wore herself and her heart into a fatigue which seemed to peel away the shell of life—revealing nothing as the fruit but rot and unimportance, and within that was the thick wooden seed of human action like an eye of blindness. This eye, this seed, when she at last took to going out of her room, she found planted in duplicate in the faces of everyone she met. So life and other people and herself were evacuated of meaning; and even death, for Gwendolyn, as it had emptied of significance all

the world around her, ultimately emptied itself. And she became careless with everything but sleep. Until recently she had slept some of the night and most of the day, waking and emerging for only a few hours in the evening to eat, walk, trouble people. Without reason she suddenly changed her schedule and now slept from twilight through part of the day. She looked forward to sleep anxiously although her dreams were full of wilder horror than anything in her waking mind; yet the nightmares she *knew* for unreality. She had even begun to buy enormous candles which burned eighteen hours, and which she lit at sunset as she climbed into bed. If she woke during the night and the candle were burning, its light was fantasy like an extension of sleep, and she would be in dream-awake until she fell asleep again. It was during these periods of dream-awake that she had remembered Sebastian Torks, remembered his beard as softness, his hands as wind, recalled the shreds of upholstery in the blue trailer, but most particularly his eyes, wet and fogged, distant and empty, locked not in blindness but, like Gwendolyn's, in overpowering sight. Defying a purity which conditioned her memories, but knowing no other way, she offered him in dream-awake her golden hair, her pliant breasts, the swell and spread of her tender body, her decrepit heart.

The doorbell shattered the reverie, its chime stringing along her nerves.

“Go away,” she called.

“Please open.”

“O what do you want?”

“I have forgot to give you my address should you need it. Please open.”

“I don’t want you here. Go away.”

“Very well. I shall write on a sheet of paper and put it under the door.”

After a moment she heard the slip whisper across the floor.

“Goodbye for the present, dear Glendolyn,” he said.

When Gwendolyn left the house she turned at once in the direction of Market Square; having taken a triple dose of Forgetfulness Drops she was certain she would get there. Since death’s imminence had been announced to her, she rarely went on specific errands, but when she did, if she were not numbed with Forgetfulness Drops, she almost never reached her destination, for adventure usually fell to her. Others called it disorderly conduct or, more severely, wickedness. Her favorite adventure was to enter a crowded grocery and insist on immediate service, luring the clerks to her with smiles and promises of money; she would then go round the shop, pointing to random tins and packages.

“Four of those,” she would say. “And six of these. I want twelve one-hundred a thousand of those.” And when the clerks frowned she passed several large bills between her hands and smiled. “O never mind. Ten will do.”

When enough goods were chosen she ordered them packed, some separately, some in parcels of a dozen or more, but always in complex inscrutable combinations. The other customers would complain; the clerks would groan, having by this time lost interest in Gwendolyn or her possible gratuities. She herself would be seated upon a crate, her mouth stuffed with laughter and commands.

“Look, miss,” a clerk might offer. “We haven’t got all day to wait on you.”

“But don’t you see?” she would reply. “Don’t you really see what fun it is?” And knowing that they did not see, she would continue: “No no no: the stringless beans *there!*”

Ultimately she would spring from the crate to say she had changed her mind and wanted nothing; and the dollar bills would trail behind her out the shop like a sudden-growing vine.

Once she had spent a night in the Afton jail—for indecent exposure and for soliciting the police officer who came to arrest her. But the damp night in the narrow shadowed cell was slept away in a dream of horror, and in the morning she was fined and released. Gwendolyn had had several such adventures during the past weeks, and only one had she regretted: the adventure of the blind old ladies. She had met them at twilight near the wall of the university; they had small brown faces like moles and wore refashioned men's fedoras and shapeless black coats. The one who, as she later discovered, could distinguish figures approached her and asked the way to the university.

"I'll take you there," said Gwendolyn. "I'll take you in a taxi."

They had thought the university was nearby, but perhaps, said the woman who could distinguish figures, perhaps they had been misled. Yes, sighed the other, they were often misled, and wasn't it perfectly wonderful of Gwendolyn to go out of her way like this. The girl found a taxi and rode with them to the other end of Afton, beyond the suburb, where the city turned into woods. In the cab she laughed often and asked: "Don't you see? Don't you see?" The blind old ladies folded themselves inward, their mole-faces netted and webbed.

On the highway she helped them out of the taxi. "It's over there," said Gwendolyn. "Just walk straight up this road and you'll come to the steps of the administrative building."

"I can't see anything," the woman told her. "Usually I can distinguish figures."

"But it's already night," cried Gwendolyn and laughing returned to the car. "Did you see?" she asked the driver, but he had not understood and, shrugging, drove the girl back to town. When she was at home, she was suddenly touched with terror and felt with the blind old ladies, blind to the darkness of the faraway road. She thought herself a pig and wept into sleep.

But now no adventure could befall her, for she was laden with Forgetfulness Drops and she knew not everyone could see as she could see: and that after all their eyes were wooden. So, through the thinning rain, she walked to Market Square, and as she rounded the corner saw the trailer of Se'bastian Torks. The door at the side was open, its back hooked to the blue wall; on the inside of the door was large red lettering:

SEBASTIAN TORKS

—*clairvoyant*—

reads

tarot-palm-stars

etc.

10 A.M.—10 P.M.

Gwendolyn climbed the two steps and entered: the room had not changed but now it enchanted her. She loved the sudden wall of heavy flowered chintz hanging at the far end. She loved the kerosene lamp and the walls it had smoked, and the chipped yellow oilcloth flung over the table and upon which lay the wilting tarot pack. Along the walls the same burst benches ran, the straw pricking out at corners like whiskers on the faces of old women. Gwendolyn was charmed.

The moment after she entered, the chintz curtain shook and whispered and then was pushed slightly aside as Sebastian Torks edged sideways into the room. He of-

fered his hand to Gwendolyn across the table which divided the room.

"You must remember me," she said.

"Certainly. How are you?"

"Not well. I'm going to die."

He eased his hand away from hers and motioned it over the tarot. "They're seldom wrong," he said, seating himself at the table. "Please sit down."

Gwendolyn sank to the chair opposite him and stared across the table; she had begun to laugh softly but because it was without humor it sounded in her ears like a crystal hum under the tongue. She laughed softly looking at Sebastian Torks and was thrilled by his gentle beauty—especially his eyes, even more detached than she had remembered, eyes like tender unshaped flowers. If he had struck her as unclean at their first meeting, now he did not—except perhaps the stains upon his teeth—for he seemed to her a shape of purity; she imagined the tough white cool skin beneath the suedes slanting over her melted warmth. "But is that right?" she said aloud.

"What?" From across the table his breath came to her—warm, and sweet as caramel. She took the breath into herself and unrolled a little laugh.

"Shall we look into your cards?" Sebastian Torks asked.

"No, I don't want the cards. I'm wiser now than I was. I want *you*. Will you take me?" Her face reddened in the dense damp chill of the trailer.

"Take you where?" All light receded from his eyes.

Cupping her hands over her breasts she whispered: "I give you myself."

"For what? Do you want me to read your—"

"For love. Take me for love, Sebastian Torks." Plates

of glass were smashing in her heart sending splinter points along her limbs. Laughter had ended and as the plate glass continued to crash and shatter she came to weeping. Her pink fingers brought her hair around her throat, rolled it against her cheeks. "In dream-awake you've always taken me and it was like being carried away."

He said nothing while she wept; his calm hands circled over the table and swept the cards together, then shuffled them. "Cut three times, please," he said, passing the pack to her.

"No no *no*: I don't want the cards, Sebastian Torks. You can give me peace. You *must* see that. O stop it!" (He was again pushing the pack toward her.) "I don't want the tarot. *I want you.*"

For a while Sebastian Torks sat in silence, but at last he stood up and said: "Excuse me. I'm afraid I'll have to interrupt the consultation now."

He went behind the chintz wall, but Gwendolyn did not follow him. She remained weeping and puzzled on the chair, and she wondered distantly about the faint creaks coming from the concealed part of the trailer. When she left, she put some money on the table. "I'll come back again," she called.

"Yes, please do," he replied, after a pause.

Outside she felt ravaged. She wished it had not stopped raining. She wished she were dead—but not dying. She wished she had not taken so many Forgetfulness Drops and had the courage to go on an adventure. But instead she pushed herself into the fogged twilight and went home.

Sleep

The thought of it soothed her: an exchange of horrors, an exchange of unrealities. In the fuzzy violet darkness of her room she undressed, her body moving subtly as if already edging into sleep. From the cupboard she withdrew an eighteen-hour candle, lit it, and glued its bottom to the floor beside the bed. The room was then fantastic like her dreams: alternating waves of gold and shadow washed along the walls, streamed across her body. Gwendolyn oozed into sleep, entered with terror but without surprise a nightmare world obviously incredible. She floated easily from one nightmare to the next, and as easily floated back to wakefulness.

But once awake she could not return to sleep, and although the walls shook with candleglow she could not feel she was in dream-awake. Nevertheless, she thought of Sebastian Torks, but when she tried to return to the former images, the reveries of herself with the prophet, she found them mechanical and sour. Somehow there was an error in her love but what it was or where it lay she did not know.

Toward the middle of the night she left her bed and went to the windowseat where she curled herself beside the chill pane and leaned her head against the jamb. Through the window Gwendolyn saw her back yard wrapped under a dark yet tentatively pale night as if just beyond the swollen clouds a full moon sailed. Behind her wild autumn yard lay the yards of the houses opposite, some vanished into darkness, some faintly lit by light breaking from windows. And then she noticed something astonishing: a man jumping a garden fence. The gesture was graceful and, since he was several houses away from her, seemed unnaturally elegant like a fawn leaping a long perfect arc. *A*

thief! thought Gwendolyn and watched him move in and out of darkness from one garden to the next and stop only at those houses where a window was lighted. Into the windows he peered, sometimes stepping back a bit as if for a better view.

No, Gwendolyn decided, he could not be a thief, for a thief would certainly not stop at lighted windows, but would go on to those houses darkened and asleep. Pressing her head closer to the pane she watched him approach the houses opposite, and only two buildings away he went to a window. His features were unclear to Gwendolyn but she could easily make out the rough silhouette of the beard that edged his jaw. A turnover sensation bubbled at her heart and she jumped from the windowseat and pulled the window open; the entering frost pimpled her flesh, tightened it, contracted it to her bones.

"Here I am!" she called in a high whisper. "Here, over here. O come to me."

He hadn't turned from the window into which he stared, and not until she stopped calling did he seem to hear, for in the chill silence he jumped suddenly, surprised, turned toward her and then leaped into shadows; she heard the fallen leaves and twigs crunching confusedly beneath his feet.

"It's all right," she whispered. "Don't be frightened. It's me: Gwendolyn. Come here to me, come here." And when he failed to emerge, she added: "Come here, my love."

Like part of the shadows he moved across two gardens and then over the latticework wall that bordered Gwendolyn's yard. His eyes, as he approached her window, had already caught the pulse of candleglow.

"O there you are," she sighed. "Come in."

He shook his head, but said nothing, and his eyes

moved slowly across her body. Straightening up, Gwendolyn backed into the room, her arms raised, her body swaying into dance: a winding, quickening dance rooted in the circle of her belly. From her belly all rhythms flowed; to this whirlpool of golden flesh the rest of her body clung, beholding for its life.

"I'm Rapunzel," she cried to him, and her hands brought her hair forward over her breasts. "I'm Rapunzel—locked lilywhite skin and shell-like breasts in the dark tower. Come up, my prince, my prophet! Shall I let my hair down to you—let it down to you like a solid gold chain to let you climb up to me?"

And she whirled back to the window, bending over, letting her hair hang down almost to the face of Sebastian Torks. He did not reach to her as she had expected; instead he backed away, his eyes flat with fear. Her mind was danced beyond thought, past love, past wondering why his flame-gorgeous opalescent stare had dimmed; there was only necessity.

"Stay here," she shrieked. "Come back to me. *Please!*"

"Sh-sh!" he admor'shed.

"O please. Come here; at least come to the window and look at me. Take me with your eyes."

They were both silent, and after a moment he went toward her, his face turned up to hers. "If you were with someone else . . ." he said, his words so soft, so dry, they were like a shuffling or crackling of the fallen leaves under his feet.

"Someone else . . ." she said, echoing his tone, bringing herself slowly to consciousness, beginning to feel once more the pinch of frost upon her flesh. Sebastian Torks nodded at her words, and even though in shadows his face brightened. Gradually Gwendolyn understood what he had meant; she recognized the error that had been hers, and

in his words she found a rightness, an absolute and in-human purity.

"Come back again tomorrow," she told him, her hand reaching down to touch his bearded jaw. But the motion ended incompletely, her arm arrested in space.

"I will. After midnight."

He swung round, climbed over the shaking lattice wall and disappeared through an alley between the two houses opposite.

"Do you really love me?" she asked him at length.

"Extremely," he replied and his furious black eyes narrowed as she began to laugh. "You have done that once before—at yesterday, and I do not appreciate to be laughed at. Neither I nor my emotions."

They were sitting opposite each other: she, wrapped in her kimono, cross-legged upon the bed, and he on a straight chair. Between them the eighteen-hour candle spit-and-sparked away its last moments. He wore his mackintosh again although today it was not raining, and between his columnar thighs, cased tightly in brown trousers, were those peculiar ancient fingers this time holding a book of poems.

"You would perhaps like to be read to?" he had asked upon entering the room, in his particular tone of voice which made questions sound like answers. "It is sometimes soothing to be read to when one is ill or depressed."

Gwendolyn had awakened expecting him, for during the night she had made her decision to send him for Eddie Forrest. But afterwards when the Oriental had seated himself opposite her, Gwendolyn altered her decision. This dark-skinned Oriental might serve just as well as Eddie, perhaps better, for what more than the East belonged

among candlelight and golden flesh and the exotic incomprehensible eyes of Sebastian Torks?

He had begun suddenly to read from his book of poems. They were not in English but in a mouthy tongue-tied language. Softly she repeated after him: "Gobble gabble garble." He paused in the middle and translated what he had read; the translation escaped her, and only when he began reading again was her attention drawn to him. "Kupobble glabble," she mimicked. Angrily he slammed the book closed and they settled into a silence that was not broken until she asked him if he loved her and laughed at his reply.

"Have you loved me a long time?"

"Yes, from the first time I saw you I loved you. It was the third day after this present session was begun."

"But that's only about six weeks," said Gwendolyn.

"You have ever loved silently for six weeks? But I knew it should not be long betteen you and Eh-dee. It is sad that it must have been illness that separated you."

Gwendolyn thought of correcting this, but she could not decide exactly how he had meant it; so she went beyond it, was amused, and slid her arms into the bodice of the kimono.

"Are you a Christian?" she asked him suddenly.

"There have been Christians in my family. There have been Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics and Calvinists and Lutherans. I myself am godless."

"Would you be godless if you were dying?"

"I do not clearly understand how dying can alter the factors of life. One is dying while one is still alive. You would better perhaps demand of me would I be godless were I dead. But of course I could not tell you that at present. You are devout because you believe you are dying?"

"I hardly ever think about God. O but how could I

believe in Him when I know what life is?" The Oriental's smile annoyed her. "Yes, I *do* know what it is. And I don't believe in God or in life."

"Dear Glendolyn, how can you believe in life when you have nothing to do with it?"

"How do you know I don't? And besides, why should I? I'm dying."

"You seem in your mind to confound dying with being dead, and death is much too large a point of view—and much too unimportant. We must perhaps limit ourselves to life, for that is full of smallnesses: and important ones. Do you see?"

"Of course I see. Read some more poems to me." And she laughed a little and listened to the Oriental's recitation. His eyes swung up the page every few seconds and looked at her. Soon she forgot his eyes and the poetry and all that had been said, and she gazed down at the last sputters of candlelight, remembering how this same candlelight had burned in the eyes of Sebastian Torks—and tonight this candlelight, those eyes, would take her with a purity that seemed, even at the thought of it, to lift her body away, to leave only an immaculate core of herself, like another eye, to meet and seal two crystal visions.

"You are perhaps not listening to me?"

"Do you know, I haven't eaten in days."

"There is nothing here for you to eat?"

"No—some beans, I think. They must be moldy."

"Then I shall get you rations." He stood up and turned, and Gwendolyn saw that his mackintosh had wrinkled up the back. "I shall return at once."

"O no! Not at once. Come back at midnight."

"At midnight? But you are hungry now. I will come back immediately."

"No," she laughed. "You mustn't. Come at midnight

and bring things to eat. Bring a lot of milk: I'm very thirsty. And if you come back before, I won't let you in."

"You must not let your whimsy take you away all the time," he said severely. "You are strange in the face of my love."

"And greens. I'd like some greens. Now go away and come to me at midnight. Wait! No, come before midnight—at about eleven, so we'll have time to eat first."

His face was not puzzled. He said: "I will kiss you now."

She nodded, and as he bent to her, she felt, half with anger, half with sadness, how gravely he took her kiss.

Now and then, during the afternoon, she lifted his book of poems from the day-bed and examined with amusement the picturesque lettering. But for most of the day she dozed on the bed or in the windowseat or else walked around the room, her arm outstretched, her stiff fingers patterning roads on the dusty walls. Upon one wall was a print of some sunflowers; it had come with the house and she had rarely looked at it for it was tacked slightly above eye-level. But now, cruising around the room, she noticed the print and saw that it was dulled with a layer of dust; her impulse wavered between clearing the picture and adding to its grime. Still undecided she went to the tables and the walls and the shelves and scooped dust into her hands; then, climbing on a chair, she looked at the print uncertainly.

But she made no decision for, while standing on the chair, Gwendolyn sensed evening begin to fall across her garden and she left the print and went to the windowseat where she watched night sink rapidly through the trees in

her back yard. Then she watched the darkness weave among the lacunae of the lattice wall and grow over the wall itself. She fell asleep with her eyes open; they did not close for several seconds.

In waking, she was irritable and her breath came heavily. The light was blazing overhead while the Oriental set two places at the table. On the sideboard were four bottles of milk and a bowl of mixed greens.

"How did you get in?" she asked.

"The door was not locked. I have also brought a pork roast," he said, opening one drawer after the other. "It is extremely excellent for the blood. And that which you call johnnycake. But I cannot find the cutlery."

"In the shelf under the table. Is it already eleven?"

"It will soon be."

"But *why* did you put that light on?" she cried, swinging her legs from the windowseat. "We must use candle-light."

"You are so very romantic?"

In the wardrobe she found a last candle and while fixing it into the hill of wax upon the floor, she said: "When you come tomorrow night bring a dozen of these candles. You can't get them anywhere in Afton but the electricity shop on the corner of High Street and Nathaniel Street." The candle flamed and she switched off the overhead light. "They're expensive, but I'll pay you back. Will you bring them?"

"Yes. Come now and eat."

The meal was a long one for the Oriental ate slowly and liked to talk between bites. Having awakened in a state of irritation Gwendolyn was not interested or even amused by his chatter: he talked of school and mentioned Eh-dee several times. But he never spoke when food was in his mouth and, realizing this, Gwendolyn would insist

“Eat!” when his conversation irked her. And obligingly he would take another mouthful and chew in silence. At one point, while chewing, he suddenly lifted the large dark bottle in a corner of the table.

“That is a medicine?” he asked when he had swallowed.

“No. Those are my Forgetfulness Drops.”

“Forgetfulness Drops,” he repeated. “You are given to taking narcotics?” Removing the cap, he smelled the contents.

“Eat!” she commanded.

But this time he ignored her. “Please tell me if you are a fiend.”

“A *fiend*?” And Gwendolyn laughed until the greens hung from the corners of her mouth.

“I misapply the word perhaps? In this you find no end of comedy.”

“Yes.”

“Still I pursue the question. You are a narcotics fiend?”

“No. You’re so silly. It’s a nerve medicine that a doctor gave me. I call it Forgetfulness Drops because it makes me feel that it’s not so funny that everyone doesn’t see life as I do.”

He replaced the bottle and was thoughtful a moment. “Then I believe I should call them Remembrance Drops.”

“Eat!” said Gwendolyn.

He ate.

Midst the order of the set table and the well-balanced meal and the stiff white paper napkin on her lap, Gwendolyn’s fury rose chaotically; she wanted to smash the meal on the Oriental’s head and drown it all away with a bottle of milk. The desire was so strong she would certainly have done it had she not remembered that soon a

pair of eyes would come to take her through the window. She broke a piece of johnnycake, pretending.

“On my way here at this evening,” he said, “I went by Market Sklare and there I saw once more this man Sebastian Torks. He is a clairvolant. He was pulling together his door when I went by. I hear other scholars talk of him. He is said to be remarkable. You believe in such things?”

“In what?” The words were tight and angry in her throat.

“Clairvolance.”

“*Eat!* Why must you talk so much?”

“It is one of my pleasures in living.”

Gwendolyn had sat unoccupied a long while before the Oriental pushed his plate away and told her he was done.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“A quarter to midnight,” he said, and Gwendolyn was furious. And through the ensuing silence her fury thickened like lumps in her stomach; resentment grew against herself waiting and against the Oriental waiting.

“What are you waiting for?” she shrieked at his smile. Whatever he replied she did not hear, for she had never known such fury within herself—more intense than the fury she had flung at death. And to contain it required all her concentration.

Then gentleness appeared at the window: two separate coins of it, unrelated to anything but to each other and to Gwendolyn.

“Come now,” she said without anger and without impatience as if advising herself. And the Oriental followed her across the room.

When he had almost vanished for her, he said, “Let me draw the curtains.”

“No—what are you *thinking* of?”

“But I must. It is not convenient like this.”

“No, no, you idiot.” And he obeyed.

Her eyes were always open, wandering away to the coins, the lights, the growing and receding glow beyond the glass. Not awake, and not asleep, and not in dream-awake, Gwendolyn gave herself to Sebastian Torks who took her much more greedily than she had thought he would.

So once more Gwendolyn’s schedule of sleep was altered: it became less regular now and was often interrupted—partly by her own dreams driving her to wake to the love of Sebastian Torks and partly by the Oriental who sang whisperingly, tremulously, “Glendolyn, Glendolyn: you are having a nightmare,” and thus pulled her from her dreams.

Every night, after the eyes had clamped in vision with her own and disappeared across the lattice wall, Gwendolyn would roll away from the Oriental and pour herself thoughtlessly into sleep; and she would have been content, despite all interruptions, to have slept on into the next evening. But each morning, before he went to the university, the Oriental awakened her for breakfast and, because he liked to talk, the meal was invariably a long one. When he was gone she sometimes continued to eat, but more often she placed herself in the windowseat and peered out at the garden of Sebastian Torks until she fell asleep again.

During the first days she had waked every afternoon to the rapping at the door.

“Please open.”

"But I've told you never to come here until after ten."

"Ah I long for you. Please open, my darling."

"No. O no no no . . ."

And he had rung and rapped and pleaded until Gwendolyn's heart creaked with pain and her eyes groaned with tears: but she never let him in. To avoid this she began going out afternoons. With the fulfillment of her love an extraordinary sadness had come over her; and so devouring was it that she lost the need for Forgetfulness Drops. It had begun suddenly and specifically—at first keyed only toward the Oriental when he woke her in the night and in the morning or with his pleadings in the late afternoon. But eventually the sadness grew outward so that often as she walked about the streets of Afton she would sigh and weep, moved by nothing more than the sight of a short man, a child in a window, a pair of lovers in a doorway, or only the thought of the Oriental perhaps waiting at her house, or the memory of death which she came to personify—purple-skinned and not so horrible as pitifully thin—seated miserably upon her aching bulge of senile heart. What did not sadden her was Sebastian Torks and she would see him almost every afternoon, for no matter where she walked, all the streets of Afton ultimately led her to Market Square.

Seldom did she enter the trailer or speak to him; usually she stood away watching the lamplit window until his face appeared in it. And even when Gwendolyn did break through the iced evening winds that screamed across the square and approached the quiet of the trailer Sebastian Torks treated her indifferently. Satisfied by his love at night she could accept with amusement his distant conversation in the afternoons; besides, there was a perverse correctness in it: as he had saddened her when she found

life comically barren, now that she found the barrenness sad, Sebastian Torks amused her.

“How are you?” he might ask, and then invite her in to have her fortune told.

“No,” she always said. “You *are* my darling, aren’t you?”

“The nights are cold now,” he once remarked blankly, and when Gwendolyn smiled, he added, “So when I close up at ten I go right to bed.”

“Your eyes are beautiful at midnight. Why is the world so sad, Sebastian Torks? They don’t see, do they? I knew they didn’t but I thought it was funny and crazy, so wild. Now I think it’s awfully sad. Why? Maybe love is like Forgetfulness Drops.”

“Love is like Forgetfulness Drops,” she said the same night to the Oriental.

“That is perhaps why one should call them Remembrance Drops?”

Except for a repetition of her first night’s fury on the two or three following evenings, Gwendolyn was usually tender with the Oriental; just as catastrophe, some weeks before, had caused her to feel at one with those around her, now melancholy made the contact, and this she found doubly painful, for, considering her vision of life, dejection was unreal and pointless. Yet she was moved to acts of kindness. Seated at dinner she would listen quietly while the Oriental talked, rarely insisting that he eat, and even then it was generally when she felt the tears ripping up from her chest and throat. Sometimes she would weep silently through the entire meal, responding to his comfort with louder sobs (“O I’m so sorry for you,” she might sigh) and not ebbing back to calm until the two pale lights flickered in at her through the window: and then she would return to passion and the yielding-up.

It was almost three weeks before the Oriental asked her why she cried.

"I don't know," she said.

"It is because you are unused to loving fully? Or because you believe you shall soon die?"

"No—I don't think so." She hesitated. "You said that so peculiarly. Don't you believe I'm going to die? I think in your heart you don't believe it."

He delayed an answer by filling his mouth with meat; but after he had swallowed he said suddenly: "In my heart, dear Glendolyn, I believe only that you shall soon be lying in my arms."

That night there was an instant when melancholy made her passion break, when her eyelids walled away the eyes of Sebastian Torks and dropped her momentarily into a deeper sadness.

After that she began, more often than not, to sleep dreamlessly, and when the dreams did come they charged her not with terror but compassion: and waking she was not deluded by the fantasies of candlelight. Usually, in what she once called dream-awake, she remained motionless, but occasionally she would notice the Oriental and push her body close to his and kiss him softly on the eyes or mouth. And she might think of death, but as an epigram: a truth sharp, exact, and unimportant—and in the end extremely sad. She imagined herself dead and sometimes rehearsed the role: eyes lightly closed, arms crossed upon her chest, lips half-parted as before a kiss. Once, at this game, she had the sudden thrill of being still alive, and she pursued the thrill, trying to repeat it.

The Oriental awoke and saw her twitching. "Glendolyn, Glendolyn," he sang. "You are having a nightmare."

"No, I'm awake." But her eyes remained closed.

"Why do you shake so? You fear something?"

"No: I felt I was alive. It was funny." She opened her eyes and sat up. "Once you told me I didn't have anything to do with life. What did you mean?"

"But that was long ago; it is different now. Each time we make love you are—"

"Don't tell me! I don't want to hear. I don't want to know anything more as long as I live."

"You are but a child, but a sweet child." And his arms went round her. "Ah how you are beautiful!"

"No, please—you mustn't."

And she fell asleep with her face upon his chest, her hair like a river from his belly to his neck.

She awoke at dawn, the memory of their conversation moving with nausea up from her stomach. Lifting herself from the bed she started dizzily across the room, and each throbbing spasm she offered to life.

Almost every morning after that Gwendolyn spun, awake and ill, to gulp air wildly at her door. Nausea pumped like her heart in the cold dawns, and invariably some early laborer passing by would stop to offer help. No no, she would shake her head, urging him to leave her. Sometimes she would bend at once over the side of the stoop and vomit herself to relief; but more often she would have to wait, bloated and retching, until the sensation receded. Then she would return to bed and sleep until the Oriental woke her for breakfast. She never told him of her spells; in fact she did not think about them once they were over, and even in their midst she considered them stoically as a symptom of her coming death. And in a way the coming of death pleased her, for as she had told the Oriental she wanted to know nothing more as long as she

lived, and knowledge threatened her: it wavered around passion and deepened melancholy. So she kept her thoughts vague and liquid, submitted herself to feeling, and shut away her mind when understanding menaced it. But in spite of herself knowledge was thrust upon her on the coldest day of the year.

That morning, after the Oriental had left for the university, Gwendolyn dressed in her heaviest woolen suit and folded herself into the windowseat. Often now she dressed early in the day because the house was an old one and the large window in her room was warped enough to allow blades of wind through the jambs. This day in particular was cold: a frozen purple sky bulged overhead, and below, the garden was thin with chill—the trees, the bushes, the lattice fence, all were pinched and pale. In one corner of the window, on the outside, Gwendolyn saw a sheet of lined paper tucked into the jamb. Pulling the window open rapidly she caught the slip before the wind could suck it away. Inside was the square neat handprinting she had seen once before:

Business is very bad. It's six weeks now since I came to Afton and it's too small a town to stay in so long. People have lost interest. Business is bad. I think I'll have to leave if nothing happens.

S.

P. S. The other night I couldn't sleep all night thinking how bad business was and I walked around in the streets. In the morning I passed your house in the front and saw you sick as a dog on the steps. But you seemed OK the next time I saw you.

When she had finished reading, the note remained in her mind like the skeletal cube she used to draw as a child, a cube that had mystified and enchanted her, for with successive blinks she could see into it from many different

sides, and even when it seemed she had exhausted all the possibilities, she had felt there still must be one more. So it was with the note: a scattering of words that inspired love, then joy, then fear, then sadness, then indifference, then on and on—and then was silent but potential like purple-skinned death sitting on her heart. As automatic as blinking the note continued to bob in her mind showing one skeletal side after the other. To avoid it, she threw a winter coat over her shoulders, wound a kerchief around her neck and, as she left the house, stuffed a great deal of money in her pockets.

It was a long while before she came to Market Square for, despite the frantic lashing cold, she spent all the late morning and most of the afternoon wandering along the outskirts of Afton. Sometimes when her thoughts, vague and liquid, threatened to solidify with cold and rattle noisily within her skull she stopped a stranger on the street to ask a pointless question: the location of a shop, the time, the way to an avenue she knew did not exist—and she carried the conversation on as long as possible, as long as the stranger could bear the paralyzing frost. Once, Gwendolyn herself became aware of the wind and with suddenness picked out the nearest diner and entered. There, with an otherwise unoccupied waitress, she discussed food and movie stars for thirty minutes.

Afterwards she went to Market Square. The kerosene lamp was already lit and the air in the trailer fluttered with soot. As she entered, the chintz curtain shook and Sebastian Torks appeared before her.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I found your note this morning.”

“My note? I didn’t—”

“The words have been ringing in my head; they make

me dizzy. Six weeks, you said. That you would leave . . . and saw me sick."

He sank behind the table and took the tarot in his hands. "I didn't say anything. Do you want me to read—"

"O please, Sebastian Torks, talk to me. I think you mustn't go. I *do* love you. Tell me something. Please tell me something."

"What do you want to know?" he asked, eyes set upon the pack of cards. "Everything's in here—anything you want to know."

"No, it isn't there. Because I don't even know what I want to know." She paused. "I've brought you a lot of money."

"Money . . ." he began, then hesitated, but at last went on: "Money? What for?"

"You said you needed it."

"I didn't say that. I didn't say anything. I don't want money. If you want your cards read, all right; otherwise leave me alone."

"Don't be frightened," she said softly, smiling, amused at his fear. "It's so silly, all this pretending. You mustn't be frightened. It's *me*." And she laughed. "It's me: Gwendolyn. You've such strange eyes."

"Why do you come here all the time if you don't want your fortune told? I can't waste my time like this. I *can't*!" And he replaced the pack upon the yellow oil-cloth, stood up, and went behind the curtain. From the concealed part of the trailer the familiar sounds creaked, and, listening to them, Gwendolyn seated herself a moment on the cracked leather bench. When she rose, she took all the money from her pockets and put it on the table in the center of the room.

"I've left the money here," she said, but he did not reply.

Outside the trailer she hesitated. At the corner of the square a man was motioning to her but she was not aware of him; she was aware of nothing but the weather for, although the wind had let up, the darkening air had gotten stiff with cold. Frost patterns, brittle as glass, hung webbed in space and thickened every instant so that Gwendolyn half-expected a suffocating jungle of ice to lower about her.

"I have seen you enter," said the Oriental when he reached her. "This is perhaps where you spend your afternoons?"

"No—only once in a while. Have you been waiting here in this cold?"

"It is much better now. The wind is gone away, but the frost is most unusually thick. We shall go home at once." He paused. "Your friend is seeing us from his window. Do you care for him, Glendolyn?"

"Yes."

"More than for me? It should be a terrible unhappiness."

"I care for him differently. He's not like you."

"He is perhaps more beautiful than I?" he asked, pushing a wing of black hair back from his forehead. "I shall grow a beard and you will love me better."

"Let's go home," she said and took his arm.

Heads bent with cold they crossed the icy streets quickly, silently, and when they were nearing her house, although she did not want to speak, she said, "Do you realize it's six weeks that we've been together?"

"Yes, I have been thinking about that." His tone was uncertain. "And there is something more."

"Nothing more," murmured Gwendolyn with fright. But he did not continue for they were entering the house, shaking the frost from themselves. When they had thrown

their coats into a corner and stamped warmth back into their limbs the Oriental spoke:

“And we have made love every night. That is not odd?”

“I don’t think so. Don’t talk now. Please don’t talk.” She put a knuckle to her teeth as if to silence him.

“You have perhaps done this before?”

“I suppose so. How can I remember?”

“Ah my dear Glendolyn, do you not see?”

“Do I not see?” she said automatically and shook her head.

“You are perhaps with child.”

Blazing and brilliant the overhead light whirled colors in her eyes, whirling them into her blood until her body flowed with them. Cubes of color formed revealing endlessly another side; her heart sprang with cubes and colors, her mind collapsed with light. She half-groaned, half-sighed.

“You are too happily,” he said, taking her face in his hands.

“Too happily? A baby? That isn’t possible. I’ll die before it’s ever born. How can my heart support a baby?”

“It shall. You shall bring the child. It is mine, I believe.”

“Yours?”

“It is not Eh-dee’s?”

The flaring receded and Gwendolyn sat considering. “No. It couldn’t be Eddie’s.”

“Then it is mine. Unless—you must tell me of Sebastian Torks.”

“Yes, Sebastian Torks . . .” Her eyes moved to the window, laced with frost, and beyond it to the absolute flatness of the night. Through the window, through the night, his eyes had come to her, his eyes had mixed with hers to form a vision of purity. Had that vision taken root?

Was their vacant prophecy sucking now in her body at her blood?

“It might be nothing at all,” she said. “It might be—”

“You are always prompt?”

Gwendolyn nodded. “Yes—always.”

“So then: have you lain with Sebastian Torks?” He held her close to him, his fingers sweeping down her cheek. “Do not fear to tell me. I should be angry but I should also recover.”

“I don’t know if I have. O I don’t know. Don’t *you* know? You were always here.” Then, as suddenly as she had met Sebastian Torks, as suddenly as she had loved him, she knew that if she bore a child it was not his. The prophecies he saw, the visions she had seen alone and with him, the purity and barrenness of their sight were beyond conception: this was an act of smallness and of life. “Yes,” she told the Oriental. “It could only be your child.”

After they had sat a while in silence he left the day-bed and picked his coat out of the corner. “I shall go buy things to eat,” he said.

When he was gone, Gwendolyn lifted herself slowly and, with the sadness of her love and of her life, undressed and slid her arms into the yellow kimono. *Some air*, she thought; *how I’d love some air*. So for the first time in more than two months, she opened the door that led on the back stairs and went out into the garden.

There, the world was ghosted with frost. Branches of white hung thick upon everything, cracking under her feet, standing stiff above her head, staring an otherwise dark night. She walked among the glass bushes and approached the lattice fence—no longer latticed but solid with ice—and touching it her fingers burnt with frost. And beneath this frost, beneath her freezing body, like a hot point of focus was the child: a child which, if it were born, would

be born without sight, would be born into blindness and unreasonable melancholy, ripped from a mother almost dead, yet living, to walk among these smallnesses, these crystal beauties of the ghosted night. Yes, it was the Oriental's child, and it was Gwendolyn's, for she, in spite of everything she saw, was bound to the petty and the warm and the sad and the beautiful.

And she stood crying in the frost, her hands on her belly, and because she was cold, she walked back from the garden, up the stairs into the room. But before sitting down to wait for the Oriental she did two things quickly and with little emotion. She put some money into an envelope and slid it out under the window; and then, almost as an afterthought, she drew the curtains together and closed away the glass.

At dawn the next day Sebastian Torks rose through the grey air and mounted the lip of his trailer. Tugging at the reins, he drove his pale horses out of Market Square in the northern direction toward route 17. The lines of houses he left behind were almost all dark, but now and then a sudden light forced him to turn his head but with little interest. Above, the loaded trees scraped ice across the roof of his trailer.

At the rim of Afton he reached into his trouser pocket and found that he had come to his last caramel, so he pulled his horses off to a large road on the right where he hoped to find a shop already open. Two corners away he saw the cross of a pharmacy and, bringing the trailer to a stop, he jumped down and hurried to the store. It was just opening.

“Do you have caramels?” he said, startling the small thin man who was shutting off the burglar alarm.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d like a pound of them, please.”

As he weighed out the caramels, the man said: “Some frost it’s been, ain’t it?”

“Certainly has.”

“Well, there we are, but it sure is early in the day for caramels. That’s sixty-seven cents.”

Sebastian Torks found a bill in his pocket.

“Hey, now,” said the man. “You better give me something smaller than that. I ain’t the boss here; he won’t come in till eight. I just got small cash.”

“I’m sorry. I only have large bills.”

“Well, I guess fortune-telling must be a better game than I thought. O I recognized you right off. You got your buggy over in Market Square.”

“That’s right.”

The clerk thought a moment. “I tell you what. When the kid makes his deliveries in the afternoon, I’ll make him stop by the Square and pick up the sixty-seven cents. That suit you?”

“Yes,” said Sebastian Torks.

“All right, then. Good morning to you.” And he added with a little laugh, “Maybe I’ll come around one day and make you read my palm.”

Upon the trailer, Sebastian Torks unwrapped a caramel and flicked his geldings to a start, veering them back toward the north.

Ismael

Friday night

Halleluyah! Halleluyah!

Morris's conversion complete late this hot afternoon. His new name is John, after Juan de la Cruz, and Anthony, after the church where it all began, and has now ended. He cried as the priest anointed him during the brief ceremony in the small yellow baptistery—larger-than-lifesize tears as one might expect on such an occasion. Probably really crying from relief at no longer being Jewish; it's always been such a strain on him, what with his black Irish good looks, his love of bland foods and his buried ravenous dream of living the good life as advertised by Pepsi Cola or General Motors. If Morris were really courageous, which he isn't and never was, he'd have gone the whole hog, so to speak, and become a Methodist or a Presbyterian. The Roman church is just his cowardly compromise between the renunciation of the Jew and the Annunciation of the American.

But his tears moved me anyhow. Never saw him cry before, not during all the time we lived together, nor before that when he was breaking up with Madeleine, nor after. I felt embarrassed holding the baptismal gift I'd brought him: a little Hebrew prayer book with my inscription: "Remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom."

The baptism ends; more ceremonies and vows in the

church itself. Henry Milkworth and two or three other of Morris's pious new friends on their knees like crazy, swooning over their acquisition. I am in a pew all the way back, alone, jealous, envious, angry, hurt, everything. Suddenly Peter Brendell is sitting next to me with his air of always having a big cigar in his small mouth, though he smokes nothing but marihuana. "Couldn't get away from the office any sooner . . . Missed the best part of the show, did I? . . . Well, doesn't matter. This Catholic business won't last long. It's all sex . . . He's got some new perversion every year . . . Speaking of perversion, baby, do you keep a diary? . . . No? Well, how would you like to keep one for a few days? Jot down things as they happen, *if* anything happens. We want to run something at *Snoop* on the subject. I *know* it's a funny subject for a girlie magazine, but . . . Nothing *too* authentic, mind you. I can get you seventy-five or maybe a hundred bucks for it. Well, try it anyway. What've you got to lose? You can probably use the bread . . . Come to supper tomorrow night and we'll talk about it some more."

The show's over now. Morris collects gifts and congratulations. Except mine, which I slip into my pocket. He makes much over a crucifix on a chain which is Henry Milkworth's present. Morris puts it around his neck, holds the cross in his hand. His eyes are bright, his expression exalted. "At last, at last," he says, "I have a Friend."

He's had two wives and several dozen husbands. At last he has a Friend.

"Go to hell," I say aloud. All pretend not to hear me.

But he is as anxious to get away from the others as I am, and we ditch them and go off to a bar to await confession time. He's got to make a general confession of all past sins, myself included, and he doesn't want to do it at St. Anthony's where all the confessors know the sound of his voice. What on earth would they think of him if they heard what he'd been up to, or down to, for the last thirty-

seven years? So, slightly drunk, we stroll over to the East Side, to old St. Pat's. I wait outside, on the steps. He is back in five minutes, the confession having been very general indeed.

Afterwards we take the subway out to Queens, for Friday night supper at his mother's. "Should I tell her? I must tell her. If I don't, I'm denying Christ." He worries about it throughout the hour ride. I say nothing until we reach the door of her house. And then I tell him: "What do you want to bother that old lady for? Leave her alone, and don't tell her anything."

We enter. She looks exactly like Morris: big head, handsome Irish face and all. On her it is grotesque. She always makes me feel I'm in the presence of a female impersonator. Ignoring me, she begins to complain. Why are you late, Morris? Your hair is too long. Are you still working for those Catholic charities? Why don't you get a decent job? She lights the Sabbath candles, muttering prayers and complaints. Why don't you get married again? We sit down at the kitchen table. When she turns away to get the pot of chicken soup, Morris quickly whispers grace and crosses himself, unbuttons his collar, pulls the crucifix out for a moment, winks at me, shoves it back in his shirt.

Don't say a word. Not a word. Don't vomit. Just get up and walk out the back door. Before they can say anything. As fast as you can. Get away!

There isn't a thing in the world to do but get as drunk as you can.

Saturday dawn

Drunk. But then. About one in the morning he was standing in a doorway on Mercer Street, a Puerto Rican boy wearing white ducks and red shirt, lovely he was, and

it seemed to me he smiled to me but being me I thought no and walked on for two blocks before thinking yes. So I went back and there he still was only a woman with him this time. Yet when I passed, he gave me a smile, such a smile, unmistakably a smile full of "Here you are come back again to love me as I love myself" and I burst into laughter at the pleasures of life, but walked on. At Houston Street I bethought myself, perhaps he will follow. I stopped and lo! he cometh lazily but passeth me without a glance—so I swore at myself, a vain unworthy fellow. And I walked back to Prince Street then thought again and again returned and now there he was, now both of us smiling, both laughing and finally speaking at the same time, he saying merely "hello" while I, insufferably I: "Isn't it about time we said hello?" We talked and his name is Ismael and we went for a drink at Tommy's Bar and then came back here to this room which he turned into a forest or a pasture or a river or a mountain top. Lovely as a pony, a deer, a trout. And laughs he laughs and loves himself with a joy that is foreign. My hands now smell of him, washed clean by his sweat and his come of grimy America. Afterwards we sneaked up on the roof only in our shirts to catch the breeze and his body against me always his body for he knows the truth about the soul, and his white teeth glitter and laugh when he smiles or talks. Ismael, imagine! My blood exults, my skin joyous across me. When I walked him back home to his mother's he said to come see him when I pleased and he said he would come to me and he put his dark fingers to my lips and said *basta mañana*. Then I danced down the streets and into the park to lie dizzy under the stars and the trees until the cops chased me.

Saturday noon

Sobriety, after some sleep. In my haste to get my pants off last night all the dollar bills fell out of my pocket—about five singles. Only one of them is still there. It is true he told me he was out of work—when we were going up Bleecker Street to Tommy's Bar, he said: "Why we don go home to your house? I ain got money for a drink. I had pneumonia and don work one month." (I paid for his Schenley's-and-Seven-Up but felt a twitch of mistrust even as our legs touched and our eyes wrestled—after all, I've never had a Puerto Rican before.) And he is no Puritan, as my flesh will testify, and it is probably somehow sweeter to take money lying around than to ask for it. But it alters the ecstasy, reminds me of the mind toiling and the mind toiling. And makes me feel like the foolish sentimental faggot.

Sunday

As no word from Ismael, kept my appointment with the Brendells last night. A dinner party on the terrace of their penthouse. Cool starry evening, delicious food, much to drink, charming guests. Ugh to it all. Smart young moderns—the women say fuck, though of course only among their own set. One can even talk in mixed company of one's ho-mo-secks-you-all adventures. No, no! Not adventures. This is the world where one has experiences not adventures. Publishing people. Advertising people. Oh, I am dying, Egypt, dying! I sit mainly in silence, drifting back to last night, feeling as I felt when I was in love at fifteen—the beautiful anguish. How tedious and tawdry everyone else's life has become. Oh, my impoverished companions at dinner—how will you endure your

holidays in Cannes and Venice, your perfect love affairs? There is only one possible place, one passable person in all the world.

A wind came up and Sally suggested having cognac indoors. Peter, however, asked me to stay with him on the terrace while he smoked his marihuana. We lean over the flowerpots and look across Manhattan, avoiding each other's eyes. He doesn't mention the diary. "I'm numb," he keeps saying. "I used to be a great talker, but I was always talking clichés. But when I stop talking clichés, I'm all muddled and I have nothing to say." He is bored with his job and with Sally, longs for new worlds, fresh love and passion, pleasure and pain. He keeps repeating: "I'm going to go—maybe in a week, a year, five years . . . One day I'll leave." But he is too rich, too successful now to abandon anything but his dreams. We talk of love, and I torture him a little: "Ah, the taste of a stranger's mouth! . . . Love is the only ecstasy, the only religion on this island. God isn't here, only love . . . To go off for a short fling on the side is empty, sacrilegious. When there is someone waiting at home, however awful to return to, we aren't giving our all to the new love. When to lose this love is to lose everything—ah then, there is its exquisiteness and horror . . . Tonight almost for the first time in my life I know why poets have spent so many words on love . . . Yes, it is unmanly to live a life of love, and yet when you feel compelled toward it, there can be no other." And Peter says: "I will go. You'll see."

I left soon after, but didn't want to go home so went to a bar. Saturday night, and naturally Madison Avenue represented in force. Mobs of dacron suits crowned by vacant, stupid, unlied faces, cute as buttons most of them, like an army of Tom Sawyers. God preserve us from the invasion of good fairies. Where are the screaming queens, the gigolos, the outrageous Harlem faggots—where is Ismael?

I stand at the bar for an hour or so, eavesdropping. The conversations are refined, witty, slightly bitchy like those up in Peter Brendell's penthouse. I stand, enduring the unsuffered, the wholesome, the unwise. All-American boys who at thirty or forty or fifty are still All-American boys. Fresh-faced, clean-cut—who dares apply words like sodomy, buggery to them? If Tom Sawyer's desires are unnatural, illegal, surely Aunt Polly and the rest of America must agree that nature and the laws are wrong.

My neat gins taste, under the circumstances, like ice cream soda. I begin to feel like a hood, a pervert, an imposter. But wait! This army of Tom Sawyers is as perverted as I am, and our perversion isn't merely a question of physical detail. Like Peter Brendell, we are perverted deeply, in our dreams, suffering out the doom of the butt-end of romance—destined never to profoundly have whom we love nor to profoundly love whom we have. We are animals living in despite of ourselves, contemptuous of those who are foolish enough to love us, adoring of those who find us unworthy.

I want Ismael—perhaps outside the traditional doom? I want him for the pleasure of his laughter, for his joy, his vanity, his narcissism, for his arms that held me like a vice, for his vice that now holds me like his arms. But my mind works out a series of trickeries, such as that he made me say goodnight in a doorway that wasn't his, lest I realize about the money and come hunting him out. I look at the bed and think love was made here, in fact created here—but for him there may have been only another American, a quick drink, a meeting of eyes then arms then hips, some talk and goodbye, plus a pocketful of silver.

Went home by way of Washington Square. On the railings round the park sat the eternal hosts of black and

white angels in skin-tight wings, waiting to fly toward love or money. Somber and joyless. Ashes. I pitied them no Ismael.

Monday

So with the help of a few drinks, I gathered up my courage and went to see him last night. The doorway was no deception.

He was wearing only shorts and Japanese rubber sandals; seemed delighted to see me. His body even more beautiful than on Friday—so too his face, especially the long dark eyes. His charm extravagant. A white uncle and a black aunt, sitting stiff as playing cards, were visiting the television set in the parlor. ("They don unnerstan Eenlish," says Ismael, raising an eyebrow, and to them in Spanish he lies about me shamelessly, saying I am a very famous writer, have published twenty books, etc.) The apartment excessively, sterilely clean, all in bad taste or tasteless, without character; ugly printed wallpaper, ugly printed seat covers. And Ismael.

He sits me down opposite the relatives and gives me beer and heavily begins to entertain me. Photograph albums. I steal glances at him, chest or back or legs or crotch; our eyes don't meet. Scores of photos of Ismael. None of them please me. "Don you like even this one . . . or this one . . . or this . . . ?" He is distressed and whines childishly: "Oh you don like me. Nobody likes me."

Inexorably, I rise to the bait: "Yes, Ismael, I like you."

He shakes his head gravely. "Don like me. I don like nobody, only Frankie."

My heart sinks, and I remember that at Tommy's Bar he (unnecessarily, I then thought) mentioned a friend, an advertising man, who was spending the summer in Eu-

rope. Ismael brings another album, opens it to the back and shows me numerous pictures of Frankie—Tom Sawyer. “Frankie is the only person in this world I love.”

“Does he love you?” I ask disingenuously, knowing that in the equation of romance no plus can exist except by virtue of a minus.

“Frankie says: Ismael, I love you But.”

“But what?”

He hesitates, then shrugs, smiles sourly. “I am a Puerto Rican. I don blame him. I don like my people either.”

I stare hard at the pictures and ask Ismael how it is he goes with other men. I am fishing, of course, but it’s a dragon that I pull out of the waters: “It don mean nothing. I gotta lotta love inside me but it ain for everybody.”

I look quickly through the album. Elegant East Side queens. Ismael too is surrounded by an army of Tom Sawyers but—though he’s fairer than mulatto—his spirit is Nigger Jim.

After the photos, the souvenirs. He has been in New York for eight years, so has a diploma from junior-high, report cards. I look through the cards. He was not a good student, but in that section called Character Rating he has all A’s. He Respects the Rights of Others; he Works Well With Others; he Shows Great Effort. This is obviously not the boy who would take money off the floor of another’s bedroom. A teacher would surely know who covets the purse even if she can’t tell which of her students will break a heart, will destroy a soul.

The television show is over. The aunt and uncle stand up. Ismael takes them to the door. Returns. Stands in the middle of the room. Takes my eyes with his. Holds them. Kicks off his sandals. Drops his shorts and my breath like boulders.

But it isn’t like the first time. We have lost our in-

nocence, our anonymities. We aren't bashing selfishly toward our own pleasures. We (I) seek to please. Not only does my body want his, but my heart wants his, and his wants Frankie's, and Frankie's wants—whose? How many men are here with us in bed, flailing and laboring with us, locked with us not only in the body's terrific heat but in the heart's terrible romance? I come after he does, wake to find him stroking me. Am overwhelmed with gratitude, despise myself for it.

I want to spend the night there, but he says his mother will soon be back. I ask him to come home with me. "We go out now" is his vague reply. As we dress, he takes a bit of paper from his pocket: "Look what the grocer gave me." It is the slip with my name and phone number. "Why didn't you call me yesterday?" I ask.

"You say to phone when I feel like it."

"But you said *basta mañana*."

We leave his house, go through to the park and begin walking up Fifth Avenue.

He: Did you drink a lot before you come to me?

I: Why?

He: Just tell me.

I: I had a drink, yes.

He: *One* drink I smell already on your breath. All the others I see from how you walk. Walk straight! It don look nice if people see you go zig-zag. Why you always drunk?

I pause to take some deep breaths and he goes ahead. I would have to run to catch up with him, but my pride won't let me. I call. He stops, turns and waits. But my joy of him is strangling.

We go as far as Fourteenth Street, then around and down Sixth Avenue, back toward the Village. This, he tells me, is a walk he takes every night. I don't have to ask

if he ever reaches home alone. I see the way men look at him. And I see the look he returns to most of them. Like the first look he gave me: eyes loaded.

We exchange funny stories from our adventures. He becomes annoyed that I am talking too loud, that I say "him" when I *mean* "him" and not, as he says, "a person" or some other euphemism. "If you don't take care when you talk I will go home." Outraged at being made to feel vulgar, uncouth, I bellow: "I wasn't taught my manners by your Madison Avenue closet queens. I'm a writer, Ismael. Isn't that what you told your aunt and uncle?"

He softens and smiles. "Put my name in a story."

"No. Anyway, someone already has."

"Melville," he says to my surprise.

Back in the Village. He wants to go to Tommy's Bar because we have already been there, and he is not fond of new places. On the way I speak of a Yoga exercise. My impulse is to lie down on the pavement and do it then and there, in spite of my clothes. But I am afraid of Ismael's disapproval. I say: "I'll show it to you when we get home."

"What home?"

"My home."

"Why you so sure I go back with you?"

I do not speak until we reach Tommy's. My bitterness makes me petty. When I ask what he wants to drink, he says "the same thing"—meaning of course Schenley's-and-Seven-Up (it might as well be ice cream soda). I tell him I cannot remember what the same thing is. So he reminds me and adds: "And you will take neat gin." We drink. He talks of his former job as an operator in a hat factory. He discusses the presidential election and says Kennedy will win. We leave and do the Village, bar after bar, ending up finally in a small place on Sixth Avenue. His eyes have begun to look for mine. But I know my pride would not

allow me to take him home, and it would not even allow me to admit it has been wounded. My pride has pride. It cannot say: you have hurt me, I want to leave you, I want to go home alone.

We go out on the street. Both fairly drunk. I stare at people sitting on the terrace of the O. Henry. Ismael, irritated and impatient, calls to me. I turn, grab him and hold him tight. "Will you cut out that crap!" he cries. We're crossing Sixth Avenue. I beg of him the coup de grace by shouting for all the world to hear: "Ismael, Ismael, you're such a silly little girl."

He goes ahead rapidly and silently, like a sword. I keep up with him. "Ismael, are you angry?" Silence. "Are you?" Silence. I don't know what to do. I am not frightened or anxious, but only concerned with my pride. "Ismael, say something, for Christ's sake." Silence. We reach the park and stop in full sight and hearing of the boys on the railings.

"I'm sorry," I say wearily.

He gives me a rather friendly swat on the belly and says: "You better go home now."

The sword plunges ahead. The moment of truth and love—the instant of separation.

"Thank God," I mutter as I lose sight of the swaggering silhouette in the shadows of the Judson Church. I go home dizzy, fall asleep at once. A restless night. Horrible dreams. I keep waking, but don't want to wake for fear of the feelings that await me. I pull sleep over my head like a fortress. At seven o'clock I wake in a nameless, faceless misery like mud. I cannot remember what my grief is about. I think of Morris pulling on his underwear to go to mass. I think of Peter Brendell pulling on his underwear to go to work. I think of morning and of this island waking to another day without love and without God, with nothing but a few

more sheets of scrawled paper on which for a moment, and for a certain fee, a man pretended his soul still lived. And then, like a friend, comes the old familiar blow on the head. I see the name and face of my grief, the invader outside the fortress of sleep—not Ismael, but another day. One more morning to pass through and invent. One more day.

In Praise of Vespasian

When the telephone rang this morning and a friend said: "There's very bad news from Barcelona," I knew at once what it must be, and through the rest of our conversation, and even now as I write, I contain a fixed image of Joaquin. It is a "still" from him in motion. He is caught, somewhat blurred, in the midst of walking rapidly past a plane tree on the Boulevard St. Germain. A summer night, very hot, starless and moist. The greenblack leaves of the plane tree are carved in detail by streetlights. Joaquin's shortsleeved white shirt is unbuttoned to the waist and on the ribbed chest a crucifix hangs. His trousers are cut American-style: long in the crotch, baggy, wide at the cuff. His eyes are nervous and alert, the eyes of the hunter and the hunted in one, for he is looking for love. He is viewing the men around him and also those down the street, queuing up at the *pissotière*. In a moment, if my still releases him, he will join the queue. And my heart sinks now just as it did when the image appeared to me during the telephone conversation. I refuse to free him, refuse to unfreeze the picture of him. Why? Because he is dead, and because if the still turns to motion, death will wall Joaquin's young life into its myriad urinals.

Though I liked Joaquin, I was never really easy in his presence; the fiber of him seemed somehow always to be quaking; he was too intense, too fragilely built. Also his

way of talking irritated me; whatever language he used, he used it with a clattering, tooth-rattling accent, as if he had castanets in place of molars. But he was good-looking, nearly beautiful, and today, thinking of his face, I remember the proud well-shaped bone under it, the pronounced mortality, over which the glowing skin was pulled taut. And those black restless eyes again, so black and so brilliant, for all their fierceness they often made me think of rabbits—not of their eyes but of that quivery-shivery business at their noses. He was already past thirty when I left Paris three years ago, but he looked much younger, as faggots often will, so young in fact that when I asked him how it happened he wasn't afraid of the brutal-looking laborers or the Algerian *voyous* he was constantly picking up—Paris being his sky of love, the *pissoirs* were its stars, and the men he found there its angels: "*Je les arrache des astres, mes anges desastreux*"—he told me that as soon as they reached his hotel room he warned them they must be very cautious, very quiet, as he was a minor, the implication being that he had nothing, they everything, to lose should he scream for the police. (Twice he was put to the test by Arabs who hadn't understood, believed or cared. He was beaten and robbed both times and, if anger and humiliation are interchangeable with unwillingness, raped.)

Joaquin had two passions, and he lived with the hope that through these he would find fulfillment. From men he sought love—not theirs but his own. The male body presented itself to him like a sealed envelope, a grain not yet unhusked; within was that magic word, that nourishment that would call out my friend's love. At least he believed it would. In city upon city, night after night, sometimes man after man, Joaquin ravaged his heart and his body for the sought-after emotion: the envelope was always empty, the grain seemed to have suffered a pestilence.

But if one can laugh at and be charmed by the void and the rot—and the stories Joaquin told were often very funny—it means that hope or, more important, energy is springing eternal. So on he went. Love would be found; it *could* be found. And this was not hearsay, for he himself had found it once, when he was seventeen and studying for the priesthood:

“He was a laborer of course—*au moins je reste fidèle à mes gouts*—and he would come downhill past the seminary and over to the road on the right that led down into the city. Every morning. Six A.M. I used to watch him from the window on the landing outside my dormitory. He was part or all gypsy, that was easy to see. But he had such *fine* features and tiny round ears like the Kikuyu. And gigantically hung to judge by the basket in those blue denims. All those months that I watched him I thought it was envy I felt—even with it sticking out in front of me. It’s true I thought so. Envy, but a beautiful warm envy that wasn’t corrupting and was no sin. I envied him his freedom, his dark skin, his beauty, his ears, that enormous basket. I wanted to *be* him. Imagine me, *mon lapin*, in blue denims coming down a hill, *bu...ch* as can be, and going off to work in a factory or at the harbor! Four or five months I watched him, and of course we never spoke. I don’t think he ever even noticed me at the window. And then—Oh, a terrible thing happened. One morning, to my astonishment, I saw one of the younger boys from the seminary run out on the road when my lover was passing. They talked a minute and then disappeared laughing into the orange grove across from the church. *La, oh la la, quelle déception, imagines-toi!* It’s possible it was altogether innocent—maybe they were cousins or something. Though we were all rich boys at the seminary, a lot of us had poor relatives—why not a gypsy cousin? But I didn’t speculate then. I knew they were

strangers, and I was cut to pieces with jealousy, absolutely shredded. And this wasn't the worst. The worst was that, without understanding or imagining what could be passing between them in the orchard, I felt that something truly odd was happening, and I was revolted. I was too sickened ever to go near the window again, and for weeks afterward when I'd pass that boy in the halls I'd have to turn my face away. He nauseated me."

It took Joaquin a year before he could understand and imagine. Comprehension came only when he himself went into the orange grove with a traveling salesman, a Belgian who sold vestments and church supplies. The hour in the orchard was followed by a month in the infirmary where he lay dizzy with the fright and awe of remembered ecstasy and bent double with the first attack of that mysterious ailment which nailed pain more-or-less permanently to his innards and finally killed him last week. Also he prayed, fasted, wept and longed for death—not to end his sin nor punish his guilt, but that he might have good reason to call a priest to his bedside for confession. It seemed to Joaquin, as he lay there, that his whole past had been one of passionate, orgiastic desire operating behind his blindness. It suddenly seemed to him that every man he had ever known—father, brother, uncles, friends, shopkeepers, soldiers, priests—all had struck an unrecognizable but violent flame in his blood. He had wanted every single man he had ever laid eyes on, never mind how old or fat or ugly. It seemed to him he had desired without pause, had run his eighteen years ragged in a bedevilled foray, in wildest pursuit, and he'd never even been aware of it. So he lay, appalled by the invisible salaciousness of the distant past and giddy with delight of the recent past, and in addition heartsick that he had not known enough to run out on the road to meet the gypsy the year before. Simultane-

ously, his sense of sin—like a caryatid propping up the future—drove not only anguish and agony into his soul and his intestines, but made him wonder more practically what, under the circumstances, he was to do. Could a priest vow away lust for men as he vowed away lust for women? This was something else altogether, like vowing away not merely sight or hearing, but also a blind eye, a deaf ear. Finally, while still in the infirmary, he had a dream which pointed the way:

“I was in a sacristy with the Belgian and I think he was trying to make me buy one of those vestments he sold. Anyway, he kept pulling them out of a little suitcase on the floor. I was simply dying to try one on, but I knew that for some reason I mustn’t show any interest. Then, unexpectedly, out came a robe so exquisite, I couldn’t resist. It was all golden, shot through with red and silver, marvelous for my coloring. I reached for it, *mais ce vilain garçon*, he pushed me away and put the robe on himself. Of course I became furious, and we both started shouting, and it seemed very natural that we should fall to our knees opposite each other, each of us with a great sword growing out from between his legs, and that these swords should begin dueling of themselves. While this battle was going on, I happened to look at his face and, to my horror, it wasn’t the Belgian at all, but the gypsy. Oh, what a mistake! *Comme il était adorable, ma cocotte*, and I knew he was naked underneath the robe. I began trembling with excitement, and my lips hurt so much I thought they would fall off. My arms rose and opened to him, but he didn’t notice; he was that busy watching the swords. How could I get past those blades and take the gypsy in my arms? What a problem! I jerked my hips, twitched my thighs, wiggled my ass, moved this way and that, but the swords were always in my way. And all the time my arms, my

poor open arms were waiting. At last, I knew there was only one thing to do—to fling myself forward, though this must surely mean we'd die. I hesitated, and before I had the courage I woke up."

He woke from the dream to a nostalgia and a sorrow for himself or rather for the figure with open arms who, blind and witless, had blindly and witlessly longed to hold so many men. So when the pain in his intestines receded, his loyalty to the open-armed figure was greater than his loyalty to himself, and knowing confession would be hypocritical, he withdrew from the seminary and returned to his home in Barcelona. But from here too he was soon forced to withdraw, for his factory-owning family could not have been expecting to be told the truth when they asked Joaquin why he had returned. They made plans to send him to a monastery, to get him a post with the army, to put him in a school in Madrid, to ship him hither or send him thither. But Joaquin did not wait. He sold his jewelry—watches, rings, cuff-links (a taste his mother had always indulged)—and took a bus north to Figueras and from there went by foot to the French frontier which he crossed without difficulty at night. His original goal was Holland, for the Belgian salesman had told him that in Amsterdam all the men were beautiful and queer. Joaquin did not want all the men or even many of them; but among them perhaps would be one like the gypsy—and this one he wanted. It took him nearly six years to reach Amsterdam, and by that time he was a French citizen, for the Dutch route led through Paris, and by Paris was he overcome.

He arrived there within a week of quitting Barcelona, and within a month he had a number of acquaintances who advised him to ask the government for political asylum—something he would not have thought of by himself, since his family and schools had never indicated that Franco was

someone to run away from. As this was soon after the Second World War, Joaquin had little trouble acquiring refugee status and, in 1951, he was granted citizenship. It was during his first year in Paris that Joaquin's two passions developed. The second one was—

No! I will not lie! I will not tell you of his ambitions nor how he earned his living, for there was no second passion in Joaquin, and if I seek to fabricate one, to accent (more than he did) certain other aspects of his character and life, it is because I wish you not to see him as a faggot. Joaquin was no lisping, gesturing, eye-flashing, tail-wagging queen of the gay bars or the salons. He was no fraud. He was the real thing. And he was never offended if one mistook him for a heterosexual. I would prefer to deal with Joaquin as he dealt with himself, in his diaries for example. Ah, his diaries, that record of his life from the age of fifteen —what has become of them? Probably he took them back to Barcelona and, after his funeral, the factory-owners found them filling up most of one suitcase and, without daring to peer into the books, burnt them. I will quote only from one entry; it concerns the day he went into the orange grove with the Belgian, and Joaquin writes in ecstatic detail of falling to the ground with the man, of the acute perfume of the orange leaf, of the astonishment and shock of his first kisses—and then there is a sudden break in the writing. The boy hesitates to put down the truth and is humiliated by this hesitation. Then, to punish himself—not for the truth, mind you, but for the hesitation—he writes as penance across each line, down the whole length of three pages: "He buggered me. He buggered me. He buggered me."

So I am writing this because for me there is nothing left of Joaquin but the image of him on the Boulevard St. Germain, and I want to honor and fulfill him. I have kept

him frozen in the still since, as I said, should I allow him to move, he will move down the street and into the *pissotière* which is all right with a full life ahead of him. But now that he is dead, I forbid him his urinals, for I imagine there are better, worthier, nobler, holier things to do. Like what, for instance? Oh, like anything, I suppose. After all, democracy dignifies almost everything. There are monuments, murals, songs, books, poems, great statues of marble and bronze to ennable the roles we play and give meaning to the triviality, the absurdity of our democratic lives. The factory worker, the movie star, the housewife, the cancer victim, the bum, the whore, the postman, even the queen pederast and the paralyzed child can render up his last breath with a sigh of fulfillment; *what he was has already been set on a pedestal*. But Joaquin? For Joaquin these words must be his pedestal. And make no mistake, I am not begging love off you. First of all, another's love was never something he really hungered for—only his own, much more hardly obtained. And secondly, fulfillment as we know it comes to a man through an Idea of Man, and as I seek to fulfill Joaquin I must make an abstraction of him. And who can love an Idea of Man? In spite of all the eternal flames, nobody loves the Unknown Soldier. We can only love known soldiers. We may honor that anonymously he caught a bullet at the Marne and perhaps saved us from doing likewise at the Mississippi; we honor the Idea, and a man may therein be fulfilled. It has nothing to do with love, not even when Eros himself is the Unknown Soldier.

Then, move, Joaquin! Break from the shadow of the plane tree and whirl your eyes across the masses of love everywhere along the boulevard—on the street, on *café* terraces, on the line outside the circular triptych where hope and water run.

Joaquin moves with the long reckless stride of his skinny legs, and he goes up the street hastily, joins the queue at the *pissotière*. A half-dozen men are ahead of him, awaiting their turn; they are uninteresting even in the soft of the summer Paris night—a couple of businessmen, an Algerian peanut vendor, a rather dapper young Parisian, a long American very elegant in levis but with too much movement at the pelvis and a face lovely though composed of merely recollected lust and dead eyes, like a Hollywood leading lady *en chasse*. Joaquin is disheartened, for these obviously will be the men he must meet inside. A moment of indecision and reflection. He is about to leave when unexpected magnificence is disgorged from the mouth of the *pissoir*. The rumor of a military band starts up in Joaquin's heart, and the music of anticipated love knocks through his veins. Behold a massive young Arab of delicate, arrogant beauty, with the ears of the Kikuyu and curly black oil-soaked hair. Joaquin's tongue trembles remembering the taste of the new olive, and his cheeks grow hot for knowing they will be pressed against that moist Mohammedan head. The relaxed young Arab strolls past Joaquin, catches his gaze, smiles but hardly smiles, strolls on.

Overcome by this recognition, it is several seconds before Joaquin recovers himself enough to dash from the line and make off in pursuit. He walks rapidly north on the Boulevard St. Germain, pushing through the lazy evening crowds, and in a moment nears the Algerian who, sensing Joaquin, turns, smiles, *really* smiles and breaks wide the night with unbelievably good teeth and the soft movement of soft thick lips—and then he turns away and hurries along the boulevard. Joaquin follows more swiftly; the Arab smiles back and walks on more quickly still. Since this is a reversal of the usual procedure—for in general when an Algerian is engaged it is he who pursues, inexorably, and

coyness is unthinkable—our hero pauses in his chase, wondering if he is being discouraged rather than teased. But when Joaquin stops, so too does the young Arab and gives a quick upward shake to his head. With a burst of speed Joaquin rushes forward, almost reaches his goal when the other rushes away, shoving pedestrians aside and laughing aloud. Puzzled by this game, Joaquin tries a new tempo: he slows to a stroll. So too does the Algerian. Thus, separated by ten yards, they begin a walk that takes them clear across Paris to the Place Blanche.

And the Arab has not chosen the shortest route, for once across the Seine he decides to amble (Joaquin's pace permitting) up the Champs-Elysées to the Etoile. He likes to look in shop windows, and to examine café terraces, and to study the passing automobiles, and to admire the elegant ladies, and to make sure that Joaquin is not too close, nor too quick, nor too discouraged. But Joaquin is not at all discouraged; he does not understand the game but he loves it, and he now knows the rules. When the Algerian stops to look at the world, Joaquin stops and looks at the Algerian; they both look and examine and admire. And in our hero's heart there is no mere rumor of a military band but all the brass and drums of it. *This*, this surely is love, and off the lovers go, north from the Etoile, up the Avenue Kléber, out of the Place des Ternes with its brilliant cafés into the hush and stillness of the Boulevard de Courcelles. And then the rules of the game seem about to change.

The Algerian slips into an empty *pissoir* outside the Parc Monceau. Aflush with joy Joaquin hastens after and in the glow from the moon-shaped light overhead he sees his beloved urinating calmly and tranquilly smiling. Our hero stands beside him, longs but hesitates to speak: this love affair is so embedded in silence that the exchange of a word threatens to alter the depth of it. So instead, Joaquin's

hand gropes out uncertainly, reaches—but to nothing. For, still leaking, the Algerian bursts into happy laughter and flies past Joaquin out to the street, buttoning himself on the run. Because his hand is forward and still upon nothing, our hero suffers a moment of weariness and woe. But only a moment.

The lovers continue their promenade—up the Courcelles and up the Batignolles, to the first exciting glow of Montmartre night life. Joaquin's legs have grown tired, for he is not as strong as the Algerian who, it appears, is still so full of energy he might easily do another turn around Paris. But no: Eros is kind, even if long-winded. They have reached their final avenue, the Boulevard de Clichy, and it is mobbed and raucous and aflame with color and carnival. Joaquin, however, notices nothing except his lover who, as they approach the Place Pigalle, is entering yet another *pissotière*. Our hero's patience is tested further, for the *tasse* is filled and the queue lengthy. Joaquin submits to the waiting, and the line moves slowly because only two places are free: the Algerian refuses to relinquish the third. At last it is Joaquin's turn. He enters, moves in deeply to greet his lover, and as he does so, the Algerian sways forward, opens, unfolds his lips. Our hero does not merely kiss them—but with a sigh, a groan, the whole of him falls against them. When the Algerian steps back his lips are shut tight, for he knows he holds Joaquin's soul in his mouth, and he has no intention of releasing it. Immediately, he raises his hand and rubs thumb against forefinger to indicate that he will accept money in exchange for love.

Joaquin, without a soul and with the smell of oil in his nostrils and the taste of the Arab on his tongue, is in despair. Not because his lover is a whore but because he has perhaps fifty francs in his pocket. Frenzied and miserable, he reaches down and tears his pockets out wide; two or three

coins fall through the grating at his feet and into the sink of the urinal.

The noise attracts attention from the queue outside, but Joaquin doesn't care. He cries out to his lover with exasperation: "I have nothing, nothing, but I love you! I love you!"

"Be quiet, little fool!" the Algerian whispers nervously.

"No, I won't be. I'll—"

"All right, let's go." He is evidently annoyed but he follows the elated Joaquin out of the *pissotière*. On the street he grumbles a bit about money but his irritation vanishes when our hero rubs against him and reminds him of the goodness of love. Soon they are hurrying once more, but this time side by side to seek out goodness in the Arab's room in a hotel near the Place Blanche. We leave them now, that they may make much ecstasy and many joys, and later fall asleep in one another's arms.

But before dawn, Joaquin wakes. The air is grey and smells of cold lamb; his feet ache; the oil is rancid on his tongue; the delicate face next to him is gross with sleep; the military band has long since gone home; his cheek is frozen where it was pressed against the Mohammedan head. And his soul is out of the loving mouth and back in a loveless bosom. Quietly, oh so stealthily and quietly, he slips from the bed, throws on his clothes, runs from the room and down the stairs to the chill, abandoned streets. Alone, and with no distractions, he sets off across Paris, on foot once again, having left his bus money in the sink of the urinal.

It is not always Joaquin's heart that drives him into what the English sensibly call *Conveniences*. Sometimes, quite as acute if not so inspired, a lesser organ insists. (I say lesser, yet perhaps I should say greater, for it was the bowel that killed him and not the heart, though the murderer

bowel was born of the heart, as death is inevitably born of life, as love must always create its slayer.) So we find our hero on his first trip to London at the beck of the assassin bowel, going down a dingy flight of steps, putting a penny into a coin-lock, and entering a little badly-lighted wooden booth whose decorated walls strike from the dimness, glorious as the Sistine Chapel, pious as Pompeii, breathless as Lascaux, ideal as Eden. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, though who could think evil here where it seems a thousand generations of Britons have come to pencil and carve out their dreams. Joaquin feels that through some error or some magic he has found his way into the British Unconscious, and it is one unexpectedly tumultuous with joy, a teeming womb in which all men—drawn to scale—take on the proportions of royal kings. As his reverent eyes follow the graffiti, he notices suddenly that the walls of the Unconscious begin about twenty inches above the ground, and on the floor to his right, in what must evidently be another Unconscious, a black shoe is making a rapid, soundless tapping motion. The ever-alert heart of Joaquin suspects at once that this must be the telepathy of love, and without hesitation he mimics his neighbor, setting up a soundless tap of his own. The English boot, overjoyed or overcome, pauses an instant, then with a certain diffidence, a shy formality moves ever so slowly toward the space under the partition. Joaquin responds to this, and consequently the solid English boot and the frail Parisian sandal begin a series of dances. On either side of the wall, they cautiously minuet, then timidly waltz, then tentatively fox-trot, then anxiously tango, then briefly and frenetically rumba—and the manly boot comes abruptly but gently to rest upon the quivering sandal.

Joaquin hears his toes cry out: "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest thy flock, where thou

makest it to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that is veiled . . ." But, as in all courtships, there exists the problem of how two *Unconsciouses* are going to become one when a partition separates them, has in fact created them.

A sudden scratching on the wall—and Joaquin's blood rises. He puts his ear against the sculptured crotch of James I, listening, waiting. The scratching ceases. He listens and waits. Silence. But then the boot prods the sandal, and looking down Joaquin sees that a hand has come under the partition—a too white, too fine, too hairy, too naked English hand, and that it wears no glove in this world of walls and shoes outrages our hero's sense of propriety. All love and desire recoil at the sight of the unclothed hand, but curiosity remains, for there is a piece of folded toilet-paper lying on the palm. A love letter? The map of a trysting place? Avoiding contact with the flesh, Joaquin lifts the paper and unfolds it. The message is written in red ink: "Would you like to blow me? How old are you?"

Joaquin strangles his laughter and throws the paper into the bowl. The English boot has its toe lifted anxiously, the suitor at the mercy of his lady-love, awaiting a reply. The Parisian sandal does not deign to budge. A moment goes by, and another. The anxious boot now seems pensive, and suddenly there is some more, more frantic scratching on the wall. Once again the naked hand slithers under the partition, and this time there is not only a note but also a fountain pen. Joaquin takes the offerings and unfolds the second message: "Would you like to blow me? How old are you?"

But now Joaquin's laughter cannot be controlled; it bursts spluttering across the *Unconscious*. He tears a bit of paper from the roll behind him and leaning it on the wall, below a drawing of Edward and Gaveston, he unscrews the fountain pen and writes his reply in red ink:

"I am only four years old and would not like to blow you." Pen and paper are once more about to be passed under the partition when Joaquin becomes conscious of his own hand. He is repelled by its nudity, its slenderness, its swarthiness, the suggestive swell of its knuckles. To avoid exposure, he slips the square of toilet-paper under the clip of the fountain pen and then passes the pen under the partition, his hand concealed. The offering is snapped away greedily. The note is apparently read. The boot withdraws from the sandal. There is a rustle of clothing. Flush! goes the toilet. The coin-lock clicks and the door bangs open. And away, away, flies Joaquin's first English romance, up the stairs into the crowded city.

From where our hero still sits, he can hear the rumbling tonnage of London street-life; the buses, the pedestrians, the wagons and automobiles. And among it all he believes he can hear the black boots crying down to the sandals with a despair that pierces and grieves him, makes him regret: "A garden shut up is my sister, my bride; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."

Our hero also went to Sodom for a time. I shall not tell you how he came to go there, for this would involve details that distract from his memorial and would be tantamount to carving out beside the Unknown Soldier his marching orders or the Articles of War. Joaquin merely went, as the Soldier went to battle.

Sodom—for those of you who haven't been there—is an island about ten miles in length by about two miles in width. There is no depth to it at all. It was built by men as a memorial to God, for much the same reasons that I am writing this: to praise and fulfill Him because they had heard He was dead and because His work had apparently come to nothing. The great buildings of Sodom are shaped

like tombstones, and the island is populated almost entirely by robots. Man created the robots in his own image, and he created the island in the image of a cemetery. Like Man and God, the robots are omnipotent and omniscient—except in four ways: they cannot be anything but robots, they cannot love, they cannot know they are robots, and they cannot know they cannot love. (They can, however, have suspicions, and therefore are they frequently uneasy. To alleviate this, they have invented robot Mechanics who are in six ways inferior to Man and God, and in two ways inferior to other robots: the Mechanics cannot have suspicions and they cannot know they cannot have suspicions. So all the other robots go to them for adjustment, hoping that *their* suspicions will be removed.) Where the robots can eat food, they eat chemicals instead, as one would expect. Where they can live and act, they sit in dark rooms and watch others do it for them. Where they can have faith, they mistrust the honest. Where they can have suspicions, they believe the treacherous. Where they can suffer, they prefer to be tranquil. Where they can laugh, they snicker. Where they can praise, they scorn. Where they can scorn, they worship. Where they can do almost anything but love, they do nearly nothing but hate. And where they can hate, they imagine that they love.

To this unhappy island, then, comes Joaquin. And almost from the moment of disembarkation he senses that all who enter Sodom must abandon love and, worse still, the hope of it. For here only lust is to be found, and Sodom offers it as generously as in other places Nature offers her own green womb: the grasses of lust smother all the treeless streets and avenues, the mosses of lust suffocate the great buildings, the vines of lust overhang the bars, bouquets of lust—or solitary fruits and flowers of it—perfume the hotels, the cinemas, the subways, the restaurants, the

shops, the doorways, the windows. But for our hero, love is the only soil from which lust may grow, and with revulsion he despairs the gifts of Sodom.

He despairs them, but he cannot ignore them.

At night, Joaquin cannot sleep, so heavy are his glands, so turbulent his blood. Up in a room on the fifteenth story, his hand anchored to the crucifix upon his breast, he stares out the window across a length of the dark island toward where the sky flames and fumes above the fiery heart of Sodom. And he stares toward that whorl of crimson sky into which extends the monster building of the island, the tallest tombstone in the world. To Joaquin the building is Satan with his head in the holocaust and his three red mouths that break and chew and his two white eyes spinning slowly round and round in eternal soul-gathering. Despite the mouths and his own revulsion, Joaquin relinquishes his anchor, is hooked by the wheeling white eyes, sails round with them. He wheels and spins until regardless of the time of night or morning he can no longer resist: the weight of his glands must yield to the pull of lust from below.

A tall, thin, tight-lipped, grey-faced robot in a grey business suit becomes Joaquin's guide. The robot has large fadedblue eyes whose fixed hypnotic quality is intensified by the lashes: short and thick and stiff and extremely black as if mascara'd. When the robot walks by, Joaquin's eyes meet his and there is no alternative to obedience. Our hero feels neither will nor compulsion to follow, as the guide seems to feel neither will nor compulsion to lead. There is no apparent connection between them. They are like objects floating down a belt conveyor. The island floats them along. And presently, one behind the other, they enter the subway, go through a turnstile, walk across a deserted stone landing and stop before a door marked, in spite of the na-

ture of Sodom, MEN. The robot enters. Our hero follows.

It is a fairly small white-tiled chamber with a concrete floor and a nipping smell of disinfectant. Joaquin finds that, including himself and his guide, eight male persons are present, but there is nothing in their behavior to indicate that they are in any way aware of one another. At the adjacent urinals against the left wall, two robots stand motionless. Along the right wall, in each of the pair of cabinets that either never had doors or from which the doors have been removed, a seated and motionless robot is visible. At the far wall stand the three remaining motionless robots, of whom one is Joaquin's guide, staring into space from between his black rigid lashes. Our hero, just across the threshold of the chamber, stands frozen. There is no sound, no breath. The Spanish heart in Joaquin's paralyzed chest seems unwilling to beat, throbs only at long intervals but with a compensating violence that stabs the blood into his fingertips and scalp. At first, Joaquin is expectant, but as he waits, and as the silence and stillness continue, the thrust of his heart gentles, for he begins to suppose that nothing is going to happen, that whatever is supposed to happen is now happening: that perhaps the most pure and powerful expression of lust is utter indifference. Though Joaquin wishes now to withdraw from the chamber, he finds he cannot. He is frozen into place by the transfixed robots, by his guide's rigid stare, by the very tile and odor of the room. Therefore, he remains, petrified, minute after minute.

Then, as if a button had been pushed, the place is stormed by motion. The robots spring from the wall, dash from the urinals, jump from the cabinets. Joaquin is whipped into the midst of them, astonished at their frenzy, unable to partake but aware that he is being partaken of. Legs and arms and faces and bodies flail as the robots like cowboys go leaping to saddle, or the robots like stallions

go bucking their riders. Stampeding madness must be pursuing them for they gallop with fury, and they rave, they shout, they cry, they shriek and babble nonsensically. No, no! It isn't nonsense! Joaquin abruptly understands that their cries are ~~not~~ wordless, that they are in fact all bellowing the same thing, that through the froth and foam of their mouths pulled askew by the wind they gallop through, they are all wailing: "I love you" and again "I love you" and again and continually, wailing their love as they hump across the wild and limitless prairies, a little ahead, so hardly ahead, of the stampeding madness.

Until someone in this vast wilderness screams, "I'm coming!" Joaquin sees who has screamed: his guide's stallion. The stallion has called out his death but the guide's eyes are still as fixed as glass, focussed on space, passionless though he rides and bellows, "I love you. I love you." Thunder bursts open the wilderness, a spasm crashes across the chamber, a shudder rolls from wall to wall and, suddenly, as if a button had been pressed, the crowd of robots explodes and each of the eight is flung back to the place he had come from.

No one now speaks. Once more there is silence and motionlessness, except for sighing chests and labored breathing. But soon these grow quiet. The robots stand transfixed. Nothing remains.

Paris again: a chill autumn evening and the city is strangling on fog. Yet despite the thick bluish valley vapor that clutches at stone and bone, there is gaiety at the Place Denfert where the cafés and streets are filled with those who have been freed by their offices, shops and factories. Like everyone else, Joaquin has worked all day and is having a drink before going home to pot-au-feu, boiled potatoes, salad, camembert, and another painful evening of

happy-family-life. Medical expenses—he has recently done another month in the hospital having his bowels reinvestigated—have obliged him to give up his hotel room and move in with friends. So he is at the Place Denfert to catch a bus for the southern suburbs, but his soul aches with discontent and he longs for love. Perhaps tonight, in spite of the family that awaits him and the doctor's instructions that he must rest in the evenings, he will not go home at all; perhaps he will tonight make the urinary stations of the cross, cruise the whole of the city from *pissotière* to *pissotière*. Pulling up the collar of his raincoat, he leaves his drink and the café.

In the *pissoir* down the avenue, no legs show; nonetheless Joaquin pauses at the corner an instant, attendant upon Destiny. And Destiny of course arrives, but is so modest in appearance that our hero almost overlooks it: a laborer in raincoat and blue beret, a middle-aged man, square-faced and squarely built, greying temples, flushed winey complexion, gentle-seeming, fatherly. Joaquin is not really drawn to him, but he watches him enter the *tasse* and sees his legs go round to the center urinal. *Eh bien, pourquoi pas—enfin, rien à perdre.* Besides this is only the first, and need not be the last, of all the stations of the cross. So our hero follows the man inside where, presently, they shift eyes, shake shoulders, sneak looks, smile, bow, and at last exchange visiting cards.

After a long silence, Destiny leans forward and his breath riots red wine: "*T'es joli, mon petit, hein?*"

Joaquin is grateful for the compliment: "You're not bad yourself."

"Do you have a place we can go to?"

"No—and you?"

The laborer shakes his head. "*Ah, je veux bien te baisser.*"

“I’d like it too.”

“It would give you pleasure?”

Joaquin realizes that the intent of the question is to sharpen his excitement, and it does. Now, passionately, he begins to want the man, to love him, is eager to have him, longs to suggest going to a hotel—but he cannot afford the price of a room, and he hesitates to ask Destiny to pay, for he probably hasn’t the money either. Besides, Joaquin knows that among Frenchmen the most overwhelming of passions is thrift, and he is already too fond of the laborer to risk a test of the man’s feelings, except indirectly.

“If only there were *somewhere . . .*” our hero ventures, eyes shyly, slyly lowered.

“Ah, if only . . .” agrees Destiny, reaching up to pet Joaquin’s cheeks and hair with a gesture that is, though drunkenly broken, so tender that our hero’s lids grow heavy, are closed by languor and love. “Ah, *petit*, if we had somewhere to go I would screw your little ass off.”

Joaquin knows that this is no idle boast, no vain promise, but since under the circumstances all boasts will prove idle and all promises vain our hero says: “I must leave now.”

“What a pity.”

They button up and exit together, shaking hands on the street. “Maybe we’ll meet again,” says Destiny sadly as they draw apart and lose each other in the fog.

Even more discontented than he had been earlier, Joaquin now pushes listlessly through the streets for a while, then resolving to cruise northward he is obliged to cross the Place Denfert again. And as he crosses, he sees the bus he should be taking home—and there at a window toward the front sits Destiny talking to someone opposite him. Well, thinks Joaquin, why not go home? He can at least spend the journey with his beloved laborer and—who

knows?—there may in the fog of the countryside be an empty lot, an abandoned barn; they may yet have their moment. So Joaquin springs up into the bus. All the seats are taken and the aisle is packed, but still he shoves his way through until his eyes meet Destiny's. And though Joaquin smiles, almost laughs, with delight, there is no sign of recognition in the laborer's face—or wait! yes! a flicker in the cheekbones that seems to be, impossibly, fear. Confused, Joaquin lets the crowd drive him down the aisle to the back of the bus where, though his heart and mind are on Destiny, his hand, thinking of Accident, reaches up to hold a strap against the moment of departure. The car is overheated, it stinks, and bodies are crushed together. Joaquin sickens from the smell of ammonia, exhaust fumes, sweat, undigested garlic, Frenchwomen. He shuts his eyes fiercely, drops back upon the moment of tenderness in the *pissotière*, and is so ravished by the dream, by the promise, by a dream of the imagined fulfillment of the promise and the boast, that when at last he opens his eyes the bus is already out beyond the Porte d'Orléans. Although he cannot see him because of the packed aisle, Joaquin is grateful that only a few yards away Destiny sits chatting with a companion or perhaps dozing from his wine and the swinging of the bus.

Joaquin becomes aware of raised voices and of general movement along the aisle: thrusts, jostlings, then complaints about it all. He looks toward the front of the bus and there sees Destiny with flushed furious face, sailing his way through the crowd.

“That queer! I'll get that dirty fag!” he is shouting, and Joaquin's intestines leap at the words. Ferocious Destiny is making straight for our hero, bawling: “You pansy, you lousy little bugger, I'll fix you.”

Joaquin groans as pain begins to flash through his

belly. The laborer is there beside him now, shaking with rage, his fists out before him threateningly; but he doesn't actually touch our hero, he merely roars: "I recognize you. I know who you are. You're the one. You're the lousy little fag who made a pass at me in the shithouse." He looks sweepingly at the people roundabout: "Stinking fairies everywhere these days. A man isn't even safe pissing anymore."

All the faces in the bus, all expressionless, all interested but utterly detached, all are turned upon Joaquin who stands astonished, humiliated, the love in him wounded and dazed. Yet he stands upright for the intestinal ache has gathered his spirit into a spear upon which he and his heart are impaled, held rigid. As Destiny—this laborer, this lover, this tender promising father—flings slop at him, he longs to say something, to pretend outrage, to plead innocence, to beg mercy, to threaten. But he can say nothing, for he has forgotten the French language—and also the Spanish language, and the English language, and all the incomprehensible, pointless, useless tongues of humanity. He can speak only with the divine tongue of pain. If he opens his mouth the tongue will burst forth howling and shrieking the agony that enflames and scorches his bowel, that slashes and shreds him and cleaves him and rives him and that will ultimately bring him to a hospital in Barcelona where a further slit will be cut in his belly and where his anus will be sewn tight, more like judgment than treatment. And there in Barcelona will he lie for a week under an oxygen tent, surrounded by faces curious but indifferent, while he rattles his miserable way toward a destination he doesn't want to reach, stuffed at last with hopeless heart and returned at last to his family, all in one piece and still bearing his old Catalan name, yet like the glorious soldier—Mutilated and Unknown.

Joaquin, Joaquin, if I had a voice I would sing to you who have no ears, and I would not sing a dirge but a cradle-song: to the child so freshly lain within the Spanish ground. I would sing, Joaquin, how your drying corpse became Earth's newborn heart making her hunger to love, and how your healing wounds became Earth's restless eyes making her hunt for love, and how your slowly dissolving agony became Earth's fury, Earth's inexorable courage, so that when failure stoked the fire in her gut, when futility cancered and fouled her, when desperation festered her, tumored her, gangrened her, poisoned her and made the whole of her rot, she still went on cruising, the raging insane beast of the cosmos, making all the planetary stations of the cross, until she herself was cut to pieces and was laid herself like a newborn heart into the ground of this loveless universe.

Once more, and finally, Joaquin will move.

At the Porte d'Auteuil, the most westerly gate of Paris, where the city abruptly strips and flings itself out upon the weeds and forests of Boulogne, there is a great boulevard named for Exelmans, a known soldier. Running along the middle of this boulevard is a tremendous stone bridge which, though now unused, was once part of a railway that circled Paris. Buses have made it obsolete. It stands graceful and monstrous, its underside full of vaultings and gloomy arcades that shelter bums, lovers, open markets. At one turning of the bridge, embedded in the wall, is the city's empress *pissotière*. This is not a round but a long one and can accommodate perhaps a score of men. On mild nights, or even on cold ones, the place is usually jammed. Seldom will you find a foreigner here; this is the great melting-pot of French society—French

male society that is to say, for the only women present are Aphrodite and Undine, both foreigners—and all levels are represented: students, industrialists, functionaries, ambassadors, ordinary faggots, laborers, husbands and fathers, all. Toward one o'clock in the morning, the *tasse* becomes quite daring in its activity. The men pair off; some leave and some, as in Sodom, stay.

A bitter winter night, the pavement sparkling with frost. Auteuil, this quarter of the upper-upper middle class, sleeps. Joaquin comes down Exelmans and slips into the *pissotière*, taking the one available urinal, almost in the center next to a sailor. He looks up and down the long row speculatively. At first it is too dark to see clearly, but soon his eyes adjust, and faces, expressions, desires begin to emerge. Hands move, feet shift, there are whispers and rustlings, moans and the sounds of moist flesh. Then suddenly a hush, a held breath—something unusual is happening.

An extraordinary figure has swaggered in, his hands plunged into the pockets of a heavy woolen windbreaker. He is a monument of a man, much too tall to be French. Asia or Africa must at one time have raped his ancestry and his complexion, since even in the dimness Joaquin can tell that the color of his skin is not altogether European. His head is large and crowned with generous waves of red-blonde hair, probably dyed. His eyes are dark. The ears are round and small like the Kikuyu. His neck is powerful. His shoulders wing worldward without cowardice. Up and back he swaggers behind the line of men, offering himself to their eyes and promising perfect love. And twenty men are each of them alone with him. But whom will he choose? Up and back he goes, up and back.

At last, decisively, he pauses behind the center urinal and, without removing his hands from his pockets, jabs his

elbow against the sailor's ribs and indicates by an upward thrust of the head that he wants not him but his place. Differentially the sailor vacates; one has no alternative with heroes.

Hands now on hips, the swaggerer stands at the urinal revealing himself to all and accepting reverence. From both ends, like the lines of a cathedral, attention focuses toward the center, toward the swaggering giant with gleaming hair who, as in Joaquin's dream, seems now invested in a robe of gold, shot through with red and silver. Twenty pairs of devout eyes genuflect and twenty hearts bring tribute. The eyes chant. The hearts carol. Undine sings. Aphrodite hums. Now, in this frozen night of joy, there are no swords between men. There are no secret jealousies, no envies, no rivalries, no rancor against the hero's choice, against him who will know the ultimate accomplishment of love. And Joaquin, beside the swaggerer, closes his eyes, drops to his knees violently as if suffering a conversion or a revelation and, throwing wide his arms to grasp him who comes to them, opens his lips upon Life Everlasting.

Two Fables

THE FROG

One afternoon in autumn I went out to my garden to gather the snails. As they always bred thickest in the pit where the water meter lay, I went directly back of the garden and lifted the raft-like covering of the pit and at once began pulling snails from round the sides. But I stopped quite suddenly, for I noticed two swollen eyes staring up at me.

These eyes led to a warty green head which flowed neckless into a shiny green body. After a moment the frog croaked and jumped from his corner into the palm of my hand. Out of surprise and pleasure I began to laugh. With this, the frog croaked twice more and sprang upward, putting his thick ugly face against my mouth. This further amused me and my back bent with laughter. It was some time before I noticed that I was laughing without any sound. I tried to laugh aloud but nothing came from my throat save an odd little click. Disturbed, I went back to the house and seated myself in the study, placing the frog and a saucer of milk before me on the desk. In the course of the afternoon I attempted to laugh several times, but since there was very little to amuse me I could only smile.

In the evening two gentlemen with whom I had gone to school, and a lady came to visit. When they were all

seated comfortably, I said: "This afternoon, while gathering snails, I found a frog in the garden."

"Did you?" asked the gentlemen.

"How loathesome," said the lady.

"Wait a minute," I told them. "I'll show him to you."

And I went to the study where the frog sat in the saucer of milk. I put him into the palm of my hand and brought him out to my friends.

"O he's disgusting," said the lady.

"No, he's a sweet thing," the gentlemen said and they both laughed with delight. At this sound, the frog bounced from my hand and put his face against the mouths of the two gentlemen, each in turn. They continued with the motions of laughter, but they ceased to make any noise. Upon observing her friends' faces twisting joyfully and their mouths wide open but quite silent, the lady too began to scream with laughter. But then the frog jumped at her mouth, and all three of my visitors looked at each other and frowned.

"That's a dirty trick," said the gentlemen. "You give us back our laughter."

"I didn't take it," I replied.

"O what's he done with it?" wept the lady. "What's that nauseating thing done with my laughter?"

"I believe he's eaten it," I said.

They were all extremely put out and took their coats and left without saying goodnight.

In the morning a strange man brought a letter inviting me to appear in court with the frog. When I went to the court, the judge, the jury, and all the other people present —except the two gentlemen and the lady—were highly amused.

"You'd better not laugh at that loathesome thing," said the lady in a loud voice, but no one obeyed her and the hall rang with laughter.

When the frog had silenced everyone, the complaint was read and the trial began. Since both the frog and I pleaded guilty, it was all over in an hour. The little green beast was sentenced to death, but I was let off on the condition I returned everybody's laughter within thirty days. As this was clearly impossible, I sold my house and grew a beard and went to live in the north.

Some while later I read in a newspaper that the frog had escaped from prison before his execution, so I went back to my old home one night and, seeing all the lights out, climbed into the garden and ran to the pit where the water meter lay. He seemed very pleased to see me, but he had grown quite thin. In the train on the way back to the north, however, we found several laughing people and by the time we reached home he was looking as bonny as ever.

Nowadays he is extremely contented and doesn't mind going for as long as a month without a meal. When he begins to look wan I take him on a short journey to avoid local difficulties. Sometimes, if it is impossible for me to get away, I bring him to a cinema and let him eat at the filmed laughter. This is not so nourishing, of course, but it keeps him going, and I find it most terribly amusing to observe the audience when the frog hurls himself at the screen, and the sound track seems to go dead in the actors' mouths. I sometimes think I must burst into laughter—if I possibly could.

THE VICTORY

The past had known the mother for a more courageous woman, had watched her bury to the glory of the nation and its cause a husband, three sons, two daughters and much of herself since long before she had been pulled armless and legless from under the bombed garden wall. But now the government had begun drafting nine-year-

olds, and when they came to take her benjamin away, the mother weakened and moaned to them: "How can you leave me so? How can a woman without limbs survive alone?"

They put her on a chair beside an open window in the front room of her house, and they said: "Should you wish to be fed or moved, you need only call to a passer-by. We are all brothers in this war, and everyone will be happy to help you." Then they left with her boy, and she wept, her face averted from the window, for she was a proud woman and wished no one to see her tears.

Thus did she remain until after dark when suffering and an evening chill exhausted both her and her pride. Longing for sleep, she began wailing out to passing strangers, begging them to move her to her bed; but while many were anxious to help, most were as maimed as she and could not be of service. Toward midnight, however, an old man came to her rescue—much to her misfortune, because his two arms were so mangled that he was at last obliged to take the mother's hair between his teeth in order to carry her, shrieking and dangling, to the bedroom in back of the house. There, left to herself with heart and head aching, the mother could not fall asleep. Her thoughts grew more and more unhappy, and with the first dull signs of dawn she began wailing once again. But no one answered the cries, and ultimately the mother realized she was too far from the street for anyone to hear her. Yet she did not despair. Instead she flung herself off the bed and through clever use of chin and shoulders dragged her body across the house. Within two days she was once more seated on the chair beside the window.

She never again dared ask to be moved but sat all day and all night gazing out at the ruined road that had once been a great boulevard but from which every house,

save her own, was now gone, destroyed in those faraway days when the nations had airplanes. So she sat, her sorrows hidden, for she tried to show a jolly face to passers-by and to the Postman and the Messenger from the Food Ministry who brought cations and battle-news. But in her soul she wept for her son and herself, and she cursed the war.

Some weeks after the boy had gone, a letter was brought to the mother; aided by the Postman, she read: "Dear Mother, I miss you and wish I could be with you now. Do not worry, the War will soon be over as the Eneiny is younger than us and we can easily beat them. Pray to God and Hope for the Best. We must all do our duty. Certain that these Words find you as well and happy as they leave me I am, Ever Your Loving Son."

"O my child," sighed the mother, restraining her tears.

"Come, come," said the Postman. "You must do as he says: pray to God and hope for the best. Think of our duty! You will see—mark my words: all will come right in the end."

So the mother prayed and hoped, but in her soul she doubted and wept, and when half a year had passed without a second letter from her son, she began to despair.

One afternoon the Messenger from the Food Ministry came, and as always he put the mother's supply of bread on the window sill so that, by merely bending, she could eat, and as always he brought her news.

"Yesterday, they started drafting the six-year-olds, and there is talk of rebellion because the little traitors refuse to go to war. They say they do not want to preserve their way of life. Many of them have been jailed and will certainly be executed under Martial Law since there are not enough guards for the prisons."

The mother moaned. "What can all this lead to?"

"Take heart!" said the Messenger. "Such weakness is treacherous. All must come right in the end."

But as time went on things worsened: the six-year-olds were executed and the five-year-olds called up instead. And one night, while the mother slept, her bread was stolen from the window sill. The Messenger from the Food Ministry failed to return. Her thoughts grew darker and she wished that she were dead or else that she had never been born at all. "But O what trace *is* there?" the mother whimpered. "What trace is left of my birth?"

Fortunately, however, even despair requires nourishment, so when the mother had sat for two weeks without food, she became indifferent to her suffering, indeed barely noticed it, and instead slept or fainted frequently.

On a lovely spring morning, explosions awakened her, and through almost useless eyes she saw many many people stumbling, limping, crawling, dragging themselves along her road, and although they moved only very slowly, they appeared to be in a great hurry. Having observed them for several moments, the mother fell asleep and did not wake until twilight. There were fewer people now, but these too were rushing slowly. Suddenly, a faceless woman left the road, came close to the mother's window, looked up at her, and the large raw mouth screamed: "Run! Run for your life! We are defeated. The enemy is entering the city."

During the night the street emptied and the explosions ceased. The mother slept fitfully, sensing the strange new calm, and by dawn was fully awake. She had been staring out the window for several hours when she heard the slow, steady approach of marching feet. And soon there appeared on the road before the mother's house a group of children wearing the uniform of her own country and led by a boy who, though no more than ten years old, was considerably

older than his followers. With a start, the mother recognized the leader and she cried out: "My son! My baby!"

"Company halt!" shouted the boy, and the group of children turned to look at the mother. Cautiously, they began approaching her window. Still several feet away from her, they hesitated, lifting their rifles, and the leader said: "Are you the government?"

"No, no, I am your mother. O if I had arms to hold you—"

"We are the enemy, and I am general of this army. We have conquered your country. Our orders are to continue fighting until your unconditional surrender."

The mother smiled and shook her head, nearly fainting from this exertion. "My baby, you have conquered the wrong country."

The general was thoughtful for a moment; then he said, "You must sign a statement of unconditional surrender."

"I have no hands to sign with," the mother told him gently. "Besides only the government can surrender."

"You are the government. Everyone else has been killed or has run away. If you sign, no harm will come to you. But if not, you will be executed."

"I am your mother. This is your country."

"Even supposing I were your son, and even supposing this were my country, you must remember that in time of war the most important thing is Duty. As a general, it is my duty to conquer. It is up to your conscience to decide what your duty is—though I have warned you of the consequences."

The mother felt as if she were awakening from a long sleep. With a few brief words, her son had restored her courage and her old spirit. How the boy had grown in character and wisdom! It was true: more important than

love between them was their duty to nation and to noble principle—although the mother could no longer remember what her country was like nor what its cause had been. Yet she knew her duty.

“No!” she shrieked with new-found strength. “Monster! I will never surrender. To my last breath I will fight and destroy you.”

There was both pride and outrage in the general’s eyes as he dragged the mother through the window and carried her out to the street where she was propped up against the bombed garden wall. When the enemy raised their rifles the mother’s soul swelled within her.

After the smoke cleared, the general bent over the mother and to his satisfaction saw that she was dead.

“We must continue,” he told his followers, controlling his tears. “We must go on until we find the government.”

Beds and Boards

Because of the rain that evening, there were only three customers after nine o'clock, yet Ben did not close the shop until midnight, an hour later than usual. He sat among the handmade lamps of Enlightenment, Inc., reading Conrad, but less conscious of the novel than of the alternate waves of anger and fright that made his blood heave every few minutes. Martha, his wife, the mother of his two children, would be sitting at home among those piles of furniture still left to burn. There was nothing more for her to do. She would be sitting, expecting him home early, expecting idle tender hours, perhaps a serious talk, an exchange of vows and sentiments.

At twelve, he put on his beret and duffel coat, pulled the switch that extinguished two dozen lamps simultaneously, and locked his shop. The rain was hardly more than a drizzle now, and, it being Friday night, the streets were not empty. There was a lot of traffic, some pedestrians—pleasure seekers, tourists, people who, by merely crossing a threshold, could become in Ben's eyes the suburban idiots who bought his lamps. He was relieved to see the park deserted, and, walking slowly across it, he noticed with pleasure that the trees were wrapped in smoke, smoke hanging heavily like moss off the branches. Of course he should have realized there was fog—he'd been hearing the

horns for hours. But hearing them now, in the midst of the fog that brought them to life, gave him a sense of the island and of those two surrounding streams of water and of those lowing, braying tugs or ships, homing into Manhattan like cattle. Like *cattle*? How tame the image was! Once, he reflected, not so long ago, the sound of a foghorn would have been enough to make his heart wild with joy and horror, like a medieval sailor traveling past the rumored limits of the world. Tonight he thought of cattle, and of the possibility that her plane might not take off in the morning.

On the other side of the park, the streets were quiet. He climbed the four flights of stairs to their apartment and pushed open the door. It was unlocked. In their living room (which was also their bedroom) she was sitting in the chair beside the cold fireplace and pretending to be asleep. At her feet, on the little coffee table, were two glasses and a sealed bottle of Spumante in a casserole full of melting ice. She hadn't dared buy champagne, and where this fear of his anger would once have moved and gentled him, he now felt only contempt. If she wanted to pretend she was asleep, he would pretend to believe her. He took off his beret and his coat, then considered the furniture he would now hack up and feed into their immense fireplace. They seldom agreed any more, but two things they had agreed upon recently: that she and the children would go to Dublin for six months to visit her parents, and that they would destroy the furniture. Their reasons were different, but they had agreed.

"It's all so stained with our living in it," she'd said, typically—sloppy Irish. "If we gave it away, it would be like giving our secrets away or letting people watch us in bed. I couldn't bear for strangers to have it, or even friends." And he had seen no point storing these worthless and ugly pieces, most of which had come as hand-me-

downs from his brother and sisters; it would be cheaper buying other such monstrosities when Martha returned.

He lifted the axe from the floor and drove it into an end table.

“Ben!” she cried. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

This did not seem to him to necessitate a reply. He shattered the second end table.

“I suppose there was a lot of business,” she said, and though it didn’t sound like one, her statement was a reproach.

“You know perfectly well there’s never any business when it rains.”

Silence. Would she ask him why he had then, despite the importance of this night, stayed an additional hour at the shop? If she did, he would lie and say he had been repairing lamps and lost track of the time, and she would be hurt but believe him. The stupidity of it disheartened him. If only he could tell her the truth or she call him a liar.

“I stayed away because you were sitting here like an octopus.”

He didn’t say this, of course. He crumpled newspaper and struck a fire, dumping in the end tables.

“I thought you would burn the rest of the things tomorrow,” she said.

“I promised Bradford we’d be out by noon so his sons could start painting the place. When we leave for the airport in the morning, we’ll both be leaving the apartment.”

“But what about the beds?”

“What about them?”

“You’ll just leave them here?” she asked, shocked.

“It looks like that, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, Ben!”

“Oh, Ben, *what?* You want to drag the kids out of their beds and we’ll all sleep on the floor so I can burn *our*

bed and theirs tonight? Doesn't your own damn sentimentality make you sick? Don't fret, Martha, nobody's going to lie around on *our* bed—who'd ever get used to those springs sticking up their ass?"

"You felt the same way I did about burning it," she said.

He wondered if she believed that. Could she have believed that because they'd agreed on something, their feelings matched? "Bradford will probably burn them anyway," he said. "He's not going to bother carrying mattresses and bedsteads down four flights of stairs."

He began breaking wooden chairs with his hands and feet. She sat silently, in idleness. How long had it been since they, when alone together in this room, had been able to endure idleness? Years, probably. The closest they came now to doing nothing face to face was when they listened to music or fell asleep or argued. But tonight Martha had no work left, and she was obliged to sit above the Spumante, certainly pained that he had not yet mentioned the wine.

"I rang up the airport on account of the weather," she said. "The flights are going on as usual."

"Jolly good!" he exclaimed, deriding her "rang up," but she failed to notice. For the last few weeks—ever since the trip had become definite—Martha's accent, which eight years in New York had almost eliminated, had begun to return and with it the idioms of her childhood. He decided to burn the rags at once, but even before he moved toward the three large cartons, he heard her stand up.

"I just realized I put some things in the big suitcase that I meant to have in the smallest one. I'll have to repack."

Martha had surrendered, and it had become a night like any other. There was no further danger of intimate conversation, of an opening of hearts, and Ben relaxed enough to look at her while she dragged the two valises in from the foyer. Where else was she to repack? The foyer and kitchen were tiny, and this was the only room except for the one in which the children slept. Turning away from her, he fed a hundred pounds of clean, colored rags into the blaze along with a dozen shelves to keep the fire hearty. He sensed her there pitying herself, but she didn't speak until the three cartons had been emptied and the last bunches of cloth were glowing on the grate like coals.

Then she said, "Will you burn Hazel's toys tonight?"
She had reached him; he felt her pain.

"N-no," he replied uncertainly. "She might miss them in the morning, and Bobby would surely miss his. That would be a pretty bad way to start off a day that's bound to be nerve-racking for them anyhow." He paused, then continued thoughtfully, "I suppose we can leave the things there in the kids' room, and then when I get back from the airport—I mean, for Christ's sake, we've lived here for over seven years, what the hell would another couple of hours mean to Bradford? He was a pain yesterday, though. 'Out noon on Saturday, absolutely. It'll be already the fourth of the month and I'm not asking rent.' After seven years, four free days—big deal! When I get back from the airport, I'll have to find myself a room first of all; then I guess I can come back and get him to let me burn the toys. All this will probably mean I won't be able to get the shop open until five or six—and on a Saturday!"

She was so quiet that his anger began rising, but in spite of himself he said, "I suppose I could burn the beds then, too."

"I wasn't talking about burning Bobby's toys tonight, only Hazel's." She was refusing to relinquish her advantage and, his anger growing, he waited. "Females are less sentimental than males, you know." She spoke in her light, laughing tone to indicate that she was close to tears.

"It's those damn rags," he bellowed. "I thought we'd settled those damn rags weeks ago."

"Of course we had," she said gaily, and he knew she was hoping he would look into her wet eyes.

"Those damn rags weren't worth a dime, and we'd probably have had to pay thirty bucks for the space to store them. Where does your fortune come from, Lady Bountiful? Are you perhaps the unenlightened heiress of Enlightenment, Incorporated? And you make a fuss if I stay an hour late at the shop, and don't care if I waste a Saturday. Where do you think the money will come from to keep you on your Oirish holiday—from mither and fither? You can start collecting rags again when you come back."

"Years and years of them." She spoke sadly now, so there was less likelihood of tears.

"And not a patchwork quilt in sight."

"I hoped next fall, when Hazel started school—"

"All right! They're dead! They're burned! There's nothing more to fight about."

"Did you have to do it in front of me? Couldn't you wait until I was gone?"

"Isn't it terrible," he said scornfully, "being married to a man who won't be a hypocrite for you?"

He went on hacking up the furniture, tossing the pieces into the hearth. Because the heat became intense, Martha opened both windows, and he expected some remark from her about the progress of the weather. She said nothing. For perhaps an hour she said nothing, and when

occasionally he raised his eyes, he would see her watching the fire while she dreamily and pointlessly repacked. Probably she was having an inner weep and a sigh each time the axe fell, each time a board crumbled into ash. In that drawer had been dear Ben's soiled underwear; on that shelf had once stood valentines; on that table they had rolled around making love five or six years ago; while sitting in that chair she had felt the first pains of her first-born. Ben heaved the axe furiously, in spite of neighbors, whacking and splintering the past, the intermediate past that had turned the free boy full of hope into the cynical man who owned an artsy-craftsy shop, pretentiously named, and who exploited with disdain and ferocious pleasure anyone who could handle a kiln or twist a piece of junk until it looked like something that might wear a lampshade.

“Everyone was ringing me up this evening to say goodbye.”

Was she trying to make neutral conversation? Was she reminding him that in less than a dozen hours she would be gone?

He made an effort: “Is that so?”

“Connie Jason among them.”

“Oh?” He temporized, waiting for the point. She did not ordinarily take Connie’s despicable, man-chasing name in vain.

“I told her I thought I might go to France for a fortnight or so. She gave me some addresses in Paris.” Ben knew she was hesitating. “Connie said, ‘Oh, sweetie, you *must* have a love affair in Paris.’ ”

“She *would* say that,” he grunted.

“I told her I wasn’t going to Europe with any other thought than to see my parents and have them meet their grandchildren. And if I’d go to Paris it would only be to sit on a *café* terrace again or walk along the Seine.” An-

other hesitation. "I told her I'd leave all the philandering to Ben."

"Is that what you told her? How nice!"

He knew what she wanted. He was supposed to look up at her tenderly and assure her that he wouldn't philander, that he would not even notice another woman, that he would shuttle blindly between his furnished room and Enlightenment, Inc., confine all the lust that still remained in his twenty-nine-year-old body to the letters he would write to his wife—to her for whom his most passionate feeling was rage, to her toward whom he had come to feel a kind of shame in his lust; he knew her (and she him) too well for him to drop into total abandon. They were not nameless, impersonal enough to endure the madness of his sensuality. And how he had loved her eight years ago in Bavaria, where they met as students climbing mountains, and where neither possessed anything but *Lederhosen*, dreams, rucksacks, passion, and a terror that each moment was their last, that parents and oceans would soon separate them. He thought then that their lives would rush together like two hysterical brooks into the Isar, not lock together like grappling irons. Now he supported her and two children, and there was no love in his heart.

Would there ever be? Would all the sleeping lust and love in him be stabbed awake by a stranger? He had not actually been contemplating infidelity with anyone in particular, but the thought of it had helped him come to a decision about sending Martha to Ireland—which, in any case, she'd been longing for years to revisit. And the thought had not even been of infidelity so much as freedom. He cared nothing about clothes or possessions, and a furnished room would be enough for him. He could live on hot dogs and cokes, as he had before he went to Europe that summer he met Martha. He could get rid of the shop,

take odd jobs to support his family in Dublin. Be free! Be free! Gradually, in weeks or months, his heart and passions would unbend, and also his hopes. For what? What had he wanted to do before he met Martha? What had his hopes been about?

Ben suddenly realized that he was standing motionless, staring into the fire, and that Martha had come up beside him.

"I just remembered," she said. "I had a dream last night. I guess it's because I've been so nervous about going —and also because we've been burning so many things lately. It was about the airplane. The airplane was on fire."

He continued staring into the flames, and though he believed she was making up the dream, he was moved by her soft voice, so faintly, Irishly accented. Oh, God, if the plane were to explode or to crash! He would be free and they would be dead. He turned abruptly and took her in his arms.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart," he whispered. "Don't go."

"You want me not to go?" He knew she was more surprised by his sudden eruption of feeling than by what he had said.

"Don't go!"

"It would be crazy!" she exclaimed, overjoyed.

"Yes, but don't go anyway."

"We've no apartment, no furniture. They're expecting us tomorrow night in Dublin. It would be crazy. Should I not go, Ben?"

Her eyes were so blue, so begging. She was only twenty-six and still beautiful, though heavier than she had been when they met. Other men would find her beautiful: other men would lust after her. Their hearts would turn over like engines, and their legs would fly off in pursuit of

her. But, looking into her blue, begging eyes, he knew there was absolutely no possibility of her having a love affair in Paris or anywhere else. The plane could not crash or explode. There would be no deaths except in his soul. He would not get rid of his shop. He would philander a little and miss Martha and the children terribly, and in two months, or less than that, he would be begging her to come home. And when she came home, they would mate like grappling irons. His life was all set up, he told himself, for the trivial, endless deaths in the soul.

"No, you're right," he said, moving away from her and readying himself for the attack upon the last pieces of furniture. "It would be crazy. You have to go."

She went back to repacking, and he to chopping and burning.

"Ben," she called gently.

"Yes?" Having so recently held her in his arms, it was now possible for him to look at her. But her eyes were lowered.

"How would you feel if I wrote you from Dublin—if I wrote I was never coming back?"

He supposed she meant would he care? Yet the question, which would ordinarily have enraged him, unnerved him. She had not asked would he care if she and the children died in a burning airplane. He had missed the tone of her voice, tried now to rehear it, and, still without remembering, he felt she was somehow showing him a glimpse of a possible thought, something he had been certain she could not possibly think. She was not only being Martha worried about how he felt; she was a woman suggesting they play a game together. It disturbed him, for he did not believe he knew how to play games.

"What do you mean?" he parried.

"Would you be very upset?"

With a great effort, he tried to speak like himself, but his own gruff voice sounded false to him. "Oh, of course I would. What a ridiculous question!"

The last piece of furniture to go into the fire was the coffee table. Ben put the bottle of wine and the glasses on the floor, then laid the table whole upon the grate.

"I'll sweep the splinters up in the morning," she said.

"Are the suitcases done?"

She nodded, and he said, "I'll put them out in the hall."

Except for the trunk that had already been shipped to Dublin, and the beds, all their possessions were in the foyer, packed into six bags, four hers and the children's, two his. The line of valises gave him a sense of loneliness and he returned hurriedly to the main room. How empty it was! Despite the great fire that threw a red cast over the air, the room looked abandoned. There was nothing left but their bed, and Martha was sitting on it, rolling down her stockings.

"Shall we have the wine?" he asked.

"Yes, let's."

There was nothing in the room but splinters, a bed, two glasses, a bottle of Spumante in a casserole full of water, a man, and a woman. Tomorrow the woman would be gone, and, so thinking, he felt a rush of love. For, he reflected, perhaps love is only the moment before separation.

The Head of a Sad Angel

Once, in autumn, I sat all night beside the immense stone wall that surrounds the ancient cemetery of Père Lachaise. It was an ugly night, for the sky was black and rain dripped intermittently, and the battered capes of ivy on the cemetery wall swung like threats in the wind, sometimes swaying out far enough to fold for an instant into the glow of green gaslight. Between eleven o'clock—when exhausted and feeling very old but not altogether hopeless, I had sunk to my place beside the wall—and dawn, nine policemen stopped to ask me why I sat there; to each I said I mourned my Uncle Frédéric, buried within; three, rustling their capes with suspicion, examined my passport on the wrong pages, and two others asked if I didn't mind the rain or the stink of the nearby *pissotières*.

Dawn flecked the sky, then night, enraged, returned blacker, rougher: the lamps went out, the increased wind was stung with silver lines of rain, the ivy flapped and shuddered and groaned with such violence it seemed come to grief and might in a moment fling itself over the wall and scream into the dead city, and then the nervous young watchman would hear and be alarmed and at last open the gates to permit the live lady to emerge. I knew exactly

where she sat behind the wall, for one summer afternoon we'd gone to Père Lachaise, our arms loaded with dahlias. We had walked along the paths of the silent stone city and been aware, among the sepulchres, of life—in ourselves, in the sunlight and the yellow trees, in veins of moss bursting through marble. At Chopin's grave we arranged the dahlias carefully, the Countess pushing other people's offerings out of sight; then she stood up, straightened her beret, and looked into the expressionless stone face of the muse in mourning.

"It is good they took his heart to Poland, you know. Claudio says he will cut out my heart and bring it to Warsaw when I am dead."

"*O you!*!" I laughed, for it was a long time now since I'd stopped being incapable of contradicting her. "You'll never die."

"Yes," she nodded, but didn't look at me. "You would like that if I do not die. All my students would like me to live forever, only because they are selfish. No, Chopin, we never had it easy, you know. You think I have had it easy, Jesse? Look how I look—and I am only forty-six years old. You think it is the face of an easy life? When I have lost everyone: my husband, my sister, my mother, my friend." She indicated each loss by springing up a finger of her left hand; only the thumb remained unraised, yet tentative. "Now I have no one but my students. And what do they care of me? All egoists, one after the other."

"That isn't so. You know I'd do anything for you."

"Yes? You are not an egoist?" Turning to me, she laughed, her hand jumping to the small toothless mouth as if the dry sound of the laughter burnt her gums. "You think I do not know that sometimes you go to amuse yourself? Sometimes with women?"

"Does that make me an egoist?" I mumbled, more for

my own self-respect than with any intention of disproving her statement.

“Yes, that is an egoist. One must give up everything for music. Claudio—”

“Yes, yes, I know. But he didn’t come with you today, did he?”

“That is because he works. Never mind. Please not to argue in this place.”

And she sank to the step below the monument and rearranged the dahlias and spoke to Chopin in Polish. While speaking, she wept a little and dried her pale eyes with the ends of the grey chiffon scarf that was wound about her neck. Now and then she hummed a passage from a study or a waltz and seemed to discuss it with him.

Afterwards we went to see where the Rothschilds lay; and then, from the grave of Héloïse and Abélard, the Countess stole a pot of striped tulips which she brought to Oscar Wilde, who she said had once worshipped her; but I knew this was impossible. Then she was in a great rush lest we keep Claudio waiting, so we said a quick goodbye to Chopin, and the Countess pushed some newly-placed daisies to the side of the muse. We took a taxi to the Champs-Elysées and sat half an hour on the terrace of the Select before Claudio appeared.

The purple sky drooped with heat and twilight, softening the avenue and the passersby. But neither the hour nor the climate ever seemed to affect Claudio: he moved through time and temperature like a statue—being perhaps subject to them, but only over the centuries. His nose, his head, his mouth, his eyes seemed abnormally large, although actually they were not; it was only that he had a sculptured look, too steady and well-realized to be life-sized, and too determined.

When he was seated we had two rounds of cognac

which I paid for while the Countess made a joke about the GI bill of rights. "It is a pity, you know, they do not give it to artists also as to Americans." And then, in detail, I told Claudio of the long afternoon I had just spent with the Countess. He smiled and nodded; sometimes he said yes or *très bien* and rolled the Italian *r* unnecessarily; but I do not think he listened.

"A beautiful afternoon," said the Countess. "You should have come with me into the air. One day you shall have consumption like me if you do not breathe sometimes. Never mind: all great talents have consumption. You worked the concerto today? Yes? How does it go?"

I stared at Claudio, forcing a cold knowing smile to my face; but he appeared not to notice.

"Very well. Except the passage with the triple notes. I tried the new exercises . . ."

And the conversation suddenly moved away from me, turning, as it invariably did, into German which they said was easier for them than either French or English, but which I couldn't understand. After a quarter of an hour, I pushed my chair back, trying not to look offended, and told them I was leaving.

"No, you don't leave. You must stay to dine with us."

"I'd better get back to my room. I can still get a couple of hours of work in."

"Yes? Then go when you feel like it. Do the second page of the *étude*: fa-si-fa-so with second and third finger." She illustrated the movement. "Come to me Tuesday at ten-thirty."

I backed away from them, not turning to face the street until a waiter ran past me, breaking my view of the table and of the fingers that continued to fly over it like steel moths.

I had heard, then seen, these moths for the first time on a spring Sunday less than four months before the afternoon we went to Père Lachaise. I'd heard them from far away sending a polonaise across the spread canvases and the plywood shops, rolling imperiously through the Flea Market so that the piles of gilt and antique junk trembled despite the weight of their ages. Following the music I went around to the back alleys where the market glooms with overhanging roofs and narrows with goods spilling from the kiosks into the lanes. There, perhaps thirty people were semi-circled about a frontless piano shop, and the music held them still and made their faces pink. Their breath was gone: all sound was gone under this Polonaise which could deny all because, like the heart, it incorporated all. It was *piano*; it was *forte*; it was a dozen shades of tone between and beyond, and always tender as if the pianist never exerted pressure, not even for the grandest passages: the chords were sensitive and took pleasure in a lover's touch, and for joy sang the Polonaise.

When it ended I was not frozen to my place but, while the others applauded, I pushed through them, shoving paint-and-sequin ladies whose jewelry tinkled with rancor, my elbows thudding into fat men, and I emerged at the little clearing before the shop just as the pianist lifted herself from the bench. I saw nothing at first but the wide black beret and the streak of grey chiffon which moved in rapid nervous circles as if pushed by the applause.

“*Bis! Bis!*” I cried with the others and then louder than they: “*Encore: jouez encore. Je vous en prie.*”

Turning her head, she smiled to me and her tiny colorless lips flapped inward against her gums. This recognition, tenuous as it was, seemed so personal that I redened and whispered—too confidentially even for me to hear my words—“*Encore, encore!*”

“You do not hear such music in America?” she asked me, speaking English without any accent, flat, uninflected, with the soft halting rapidity of one who knows but seldom uses a language. “No, and you do not hear it in Europe too—only when *I* play.”

“Then play some more.”

“No no. I cannot, you know. I am not as I used to be. Once—” Interrupting herself, she faced the crowd, which still applauded, still insisted.

“*Mais non, mes amis. J’suis fatiguée; j’suis malade. Je—*”

“*Bis . . . bis . . . bis . . .*”

“*O écoutez . . .*” she pleaded, raising her hand to stop them, but they continued and, shrugging, she sank once more to the bench and unloosed four mazurkas and two nocturnes. Her fingers, rounded and firm, astonished me for they seemed never to touch the keys but to fly over them drawing sound like a magnet. Melodies and harmonies were set free by quiet emphasis, by pauses that roared like storm. Arpeggios leaped, chromatics were aflame, repetitions were like stars: clearly the same, but clearly different.

Afterwards she would play no more, and most of the audience shuffled out of the dark alleys, leaving me and a few spectacular women, some of whom had purple hair and others platinum, and one had orange hair rolled in small puffed balls like mimosa. All their mouthless faces were identical, vanished beneath death-white masks of powder except for the asterisks of color at their eyes. In their black-gloved hands were silver sticks or carved cigaret-holders or purses which, like their clothes, sparkled with sequins and rhinestones. Because they all shrieked at once (and much too quickly for me to understand them) and because they spat as they talked and smelled of garlic, I wandered into the unlighted shop behind and tested a

broken harpsichord whose harsh stutter surprised the ladies: they were silent a moment, looking in at me. Then I walked to a Blüthner grand which bore a polished bronze plaque telling of a first prize to Katherine de Charski in 1937.

At last the ladies, still shrieking and spitting and sparkling, started down the cluttered path, tossing back last compliments: "*Incomparable, maître, vraiment . . .*"—"Au revoir, au revoir, vous êtes l'ange de la musique."

When they were out of sight, the angel growled then looked into the darkness of the shop. "So, American, you do not go away?"

"Well, I—"

"Well, you—always they say well, or then they are afraid, or else they guess. The angel of the music, you know: they call me that. Every Sunday they come and they call me that. They should fall to their knees like before God. But they do not even buy a piano or give money. Would I take their money, do you think?"

Not moving from the Blüthner, I tried to stir the dusk up around me. "Do you sell pianos?" I asked her. "Don't you give concerts?"

"Ah, such children, these Americans. What do you know of difficulty in life? Never mind, do not tell me, please. You play the piano?"

Yes, I played the piano, and I had always said so, but now I replied, "I'm studying" because her question chafed with relativity, just as if she had asked: "You have heard *me* play the piano. Consider, and tell me, do *you* play the piano?"

"I'm studying."

"And say where, with whom."

I told her.

"So? Indeed? Very good. You have traveled far to remain in ignorance. In sixty years if you have chance you

will play your *Rhapsody in Blue* like a master. You play scales all day? Do-re-mi-fa—”

“No, not all day.”

“You work ten-twelve hours a day? How many? Altogether. I mean everything—scales backwards and forwards.”

“Well, actually I only work four or five hours a day. I’m at school all morning and then—”

“Excuse me, if you have chance you will play *Rhapsody in Blue* in ninety years.”

“I’ve already given a recital in America,” I muttered, moving back from the Blüthner, further into the dusk.

“Ah so, *maitre*. You have then nothing more to learn. You must then teach me. Come, play something for me. Come here. Come, please, do not hide yourself there. I am almost blind and cannot see you in that darkness. *Asseyez-vous.*”

I went forward reluctantly, placed myself upon the bench and complained at once that it was too low.

“Never mind. You will keep your bottom in the air.”

Unexpectedly, chords began to drop under my fingers. I wondered who had pushed them, and wondering, my face went damp and hot, my hands stiff and cold, and I stopped. But before she could say anything, I began again, my ears shut against the sounds, and I resisted the impulse to grumble about the hard touch of the piano. I played recklessly, stupidly, moving from embarrassment to fear and finally to fury—hating her, hating myself, hating the music. But instead of jumping from the bench when the waltz was done, I pushed my fingers straight into the first movement of the *Appassionata*, and I heard Beethoven roar at me. I roared back.

“You have much courage,” she said, nodding and serious, when I had stopped.

“My God, my God, my God. Believe me, please be-

lieve me: I've never played so badly in my life. I don't know—”

“Yes, what does it matter? I will make you good pianist; you have heart and strength and courage. You are young, not like me: everything is for you, when you are young. But where is your logic, your technique? You know nothing of interpretation. Your fingers are like the legs of a—how do you say?—*poulet*, you know. O I do not blame you. Today, the professors can teach you nothing. They think when you spend all day in school and two hours at piano you are big artist. No, you must give up everything for the piano; it is a jealous art. When my Claudio came to me, he was despairing. Now in two years he is big artist. In one more year he will sit on the world. You shall hear him play, you know. He gives up everything for me; he works twelve-fourteen hours a day. No going out, no women, nothing—only his music. He knows that I”—she pounded her chest rapidly—“I am the only one left today. Why do you smile, you American? Tell me who plays better than me? Rubinstein? Horowitz? Giesecking? Who?”

“That's not why I smiled.”

“If I am the greatest pianist, why should I not say so? Who listens to me anyway? These few hypocrites who come here to the market—”

“But why don't you perform?”

“Ah!” she cried, her mouth shooting open. “Have I one tooth in this mouth? Have I one costume to wear besides this filthy suit? You would like to see me on the stage with no tooth and in filthy clothes and let them make a mockery of me? Here on my head, under my beret, I have tumor as big as a box of matches, and all day and night I have headaches. I cannot work my piano. You hear me play now, and I have not worked since 1940. I shall let

them laugh at me—when once they put me on their shoulders? You know where my tradition comes from? Do you?"

I hesitated, wondering what answer she expected.

"From *Chopin!* I am the last exponent of the tradition, I"—she thumped her chest once more—"I: *Katherine Juliet Beatrice Maria la comtesse de Charski.*" Her tongue rolled and thundered with her names, and I looked down at the keys of the piano. I was not embarrassed; in fact, I was not anything, except perhaps slightly beside the point, for her grandeur was asserting itself around and beyond me, and if I caught pieces of it, it was almost accidental.

From down the path, a fat woman in a lather of foxes and a tall man under a homburg approached the shop.

"*Des Americains,*" she whispered. "*Vous parlez français?*"

"*Oui, Madame.*"

"*Madame?* Why you call me *Madame?*" she said, speaking in English, and her hands slid down her flat body indignantly. "You must call me Countess, you know. I *am* a countess. You do not believe me? I will show you marked on my passport." She ran back of the shop to a small desk upon which stood her black leather sack.

"No, please! I'm sorry, Countess. Of course I believe you. Please don't—"

But she pulled wide the mouth of the sack, her arm sinking to the elbow. "*Merde, je ne—tiens, violà!*" The passport was held together by a rubber band which had cut deep into the shredded edges. As she lifted it, the American couple walked past her to the Blüthner.

"O darling!" said the woman. "What a beautiful piano!"

"Says here . . ." the man began, bending to see the bronze plaque. "Says here it was for—"

"The Blüthner is not for sale," called the Countess, waving her passport at them. "But next to it is a very rare Pleyel. Chopin and Liszt played on it one night *chez la duchesse de Cornouailles*." Head slightly bent, she led them to the Pleyel. "Touch yourself and hear the beauty of its tone: diamonds on one end, trumpets on the other." When she returned to me, she was muttering: "To sell my Blüthner—not while I am here anyway." Then, raising her voice and thrusting her passport forward: "Here, you see. It says countess. Here in French; here in Polish. I am a true countess of the blood by birth and marriage, but I have lost everything. I had to run from war. Yes, it is not happy—but go away now. I must sell piano or I will lose my Blüthner. Come to me to my home Tuesday at eleven before noon. Here is my card with the address. I will make you big pianist. Now go away, you know."

Her card bore a gilt-relief coronet above the many names, and I thought I felt the weight of it as I pushed the card into my pocket and started down the alley. Her voice, rasping at the Americans, came after me. "You like the harpsichord? Bach himself performed on it when he played before Louis Quatorze . . ."

Around her head, like a crown tipped over a forehead, was an elastic bandage, and patches of grey hair poked out below and rose frumpishly above. Her body was indistinguishable in a pink robe which must once have been purple and velvet and ravaged by moths, and now hung shapeless down to the golden pumps on her feet.

"Come in, please. Come in. Forgive me that I greet you like this. I have not the strength to dress, and the bandage is for my headaches. It does me no good, you

know, but sometimes it makes the pain to change place.” She sighed and led me through the small empty corridor. “It is not good to be old. But I am not so old as you think! Please, never mind, do not tell me you do not think I am old. You think I am a hundred years? I am only fifty. In here, please.”

Although the room faced north, the air was amber as if once by chance sunlight had stumbled in, been reluctant to leave, and so remained, growing pale, growing dry, hanging to the walls and to the enormous chandelier whose crystals rang at the breath of our entry. Even the three eighteenth-century portraits, despite their deep blues and black shadows, seemed lacquered with sunlight, but this was not so of the faces: two frowning gentlemen, and a lady with an iron smile, her eyebrows s-shaped, like an angry woman in a cartoon. But there was little in the large room for her to be angry at: another prize piano, a black bench with four legs of inlaid pearl, two embroidered hassocks, and a white-and-gold table loaded with flowers: with tulips and lilies and roses and carnations—some fresh, some nearly dead, some like rust or burnt paper.

“What a room!” I said.

“Yes? You like? But all my furniture is sold. I have ten more rooms—all empty except for my bed. But here, you see, one may see from the windows l’Arc de Triomphe and the long avenue of *marroniers*. Trees give me peace, you know, especially in spring; here, they are like *tempo rubato*—yum-te-rum-te. I hope you shall not mind when I smoke. I smoke very much during lessons. I was teaching once a girl named Olga and she said: O pardon me, Madame la comtesse, but I cannot stand it when there is so much smoke. I must have fresh air. I have asthma. Yes, I said to her, I have worse asthma than you, and when you want fresh air you must go to the Bois de Boulogne, not to me.

You do not come here to breathe but to learn piano. She went away and two weeks later came back and brought me twenty thousand francs. O, she said, I would more choke to death than live without you. You do not believe me? I will show you letters from her; I will show you letters from biggest people in the world. They would give millions to learn from me. They—what is the matter with you? Why do you become red?"

"I thought—that is, I wondered. I mean, if I'm going to study with you, don't you think we ought to settle terms?"

"What is terms?"

"You know, for the lessons. Frankly, I can't afford very much because I've got to stay on at the school. Otherwise I won't get money under the GI bill."

"Ah, money!" She growled a moment and rubbed her head. "All you can think of is money, Americans. I am artist. I do not talk of money. Besides you have not enough money to pay me how I am worth it. I ask only that you give up everything, only to keep music. Is that agreed?"

"That's a pretty hard thing to do."

"Yes, but it is not so hard as to run with the girls and try to learn piano at the same time. Also you must not go more to school. They teach only wrong—"

"But if I don't go, I won't get the money from the government. And I've got no money of my own."

"So you will go each month and pay them registration and then you go no more until next month. You shall find that the professors are also very happy when you give them money and do not trouble them again. But now no more talk, you know. *Allons*, to the piano."

From the pocket of her robe she withdrew a package of cigarettes and a pair of steel-rimmed glasses which, when she had arranged the broken temples on top of her

ears, obliged her to keep her head constantly erect, for otherwise the glasses might slide along her nose and fall to the floor. As the lesson began, her face closed down upon its bone, cheeks and jaw tightening toward concentration, and she became a different person, or rather no person at all but an abstraction of human qualities no longer hampered by the individual past. The characteristics of her self and of her life were gone; illness, nobility, exile, despair, were of no further consequence. We had become two brains working with logic, analyzing the dispassionate and least resistant path to the heart, and from it, into the fingers. Sometimes she might pause suddenly, as if hesitating, calculating, and then we might go on or she might push me aside and illustrate a point by playing a piece, and in doing so she would change again, softening, her face becoming full and tender, her eyes pieces of swollen beauty behind the steel-rimmed glasses which would threaten to budge, begin to slide, at last bounce onto the keyboard or her lap. At the piano she was never impatient, no matter how I failed to understand her, but she was insistent, pushing us both with her logic and with her unquestioning self-confidence; each word she spoke was indubitable, was truth. "You must be now a child, an innocent. You must forget all wrong ideas of music you have learned. You start now again from beginning. *Recommençons . . .*"

We worked on until four o'clock, almost without a rest and would have continued had the doorbell not rung and shaken us out of our concentration.

"Is Claudio. We stop now," she said.

Pulling off her glasses, she stood up, crossed the room, swung the door open, and closed it behind her—all actions completed so quickly and with such energy it seemed that five hours at the piano had increased rather than diminished her strength. Left alone, I began to stretch my exhaustion

away and ease the tightness in my neck and back. So involved was I with my stretching that it was some time before I realized how long the Countess had been gone. I paused, listening, but heard only a chirring whisper, a shadow of rapid tittering conversation. Then, there was a sound like *ch-ch-ch*, and the door swung open into the room.

"Come," she said, taking long strides toward me. "You shall meet my American who thinks always about money."

A short young man followed her in, his pace as slow and lazy as his smile, and despite the set, old-man look of his face, he moved like a shy boy. One hand was in his pocket and the other seemed unsteady, hung fidgeting at his side, went once quickly through his hair, then extended itself toward me when he was only half-way across the room.

"Here is terrible Claudio. He takes from me all my strength."

"Enchanted," he said, giving me his hand.

"Me too." His smile trembled, almost ready, I thought, to erupt into a laugh, but instead it disappeared.

"You will be taking lessons with the Countess?" he asked.

"Well, I hope so." I looked to her, but her eyes were fixed on Claudio, her mouth firm, head nodding slightly.

"She is a most severe master."

"I think she's very kind."

"And most demanding."

"I don't—"

"But if she demanded less, perhaps her students would play less good. A year ago, for example, I could not take an octave; now I can take nine notes."

"That's amaz—"

"Naturally, of course, I have had to sacrifice." He was obviously in a hurry to get his piece said and over; he spoke without interest or expression, and stood perfectly still. "But after all it has been no sacrifice at all but a pleasure. For music satisfies every desire. You are prepared to make all else in your life secondary to your art?"

I didn't answer, because it was not quite a question and because, even if it had been, the tone of Claudio's voice clearly indicated that nothing could interest him less than what he was at present discussing. But he continued speaking while the Countess nodded silently and while I became embarrassed at their little game. Claudio too became embarrassed but not until he had finished, and then he turned away from me and put his hands in his pockets.

"I'd love to hear you play," I said to him. "The Countess tells me you're a wonderful pianist."

"She exaggerates. There is only one great artist in the world today, *n'est-ce pas, ma comtesse?*"

"Dirty mouth. *Salaud!*" she shrieked, and a train of giggles rattled out of her like hiccups. "And you think it is yourself! I give him everything and now he thinks he is bigger than me. But one day I will show you, *sale* Claudio, that there is still no one like Katherine de Charski." She turned to me. "I have eight students, you know—no, now I have nine. And no one gives me money; they are all poor filths, my students. One says, O I must have a new frock or I give you everything. Another says, I must pay for my piano. And I have a new frock? And I pay for my piano? No, I sell everything—even my beautiful Blüthner."

"I didn't know you'd sold it," I said. "On Sunday—"

"Yes, I sold it long time ago. And for whom? What have I? Only headaches and pains, you know. Come, feel here, the tumor on my head. You are afraid to? Never mind, so do not. If you would feel here in my private parts

you would feel a piece of iron; yes, I am all ruptures, broken to pieces." Her knuckles struck the belt, and there was a clanking sound which caused a tinkle in the chandelier. Claudio burst into laughter.

"You are wonderful, Saint Countess. You have four hundred maladies and still you are stronger than myself."

"Stronger? *Tête de vache*, I am so weak that I must take dozen tablets in the morning or I will not rise from bed. You hear how he talks to me? I put him the world to his fingers and he says I am stronger. I do everything for him, you know. Is that true? And I have nothing in revenge of it."

"One day you will. I will give you a piano made of gold with diamond keys."

"Give me nothing. I want nothing. You do not respect me because I am alone in the world, because I have lost everyone, you know. I have lost my husband, my sister, my mother, my friend." Four fingers on her left hand rose like monuments to the losses, and she shook them at Claudio. He bent to kiss her hand, but she slapped him weakly on the lips. "All my life I must run from the wars, and I leave always behind *un bien-aimé*, dead, dead. *Rien, rien, rien—je n' ai plus rien, rien que ces crottes d'étudiants.*" And suddenly she was speaking German, her voice rising, reaching a tower of curses upon Claudio's head. His head rose with her curses, and he smiled, shrugged and went to the piano. She followed, still cursing, but gradually lowering her voice to a mutter in French. "*Je t'emmerde*," she whispered, and then was altogether silent, listening to him play. At first her body was still, stiff, but almost imperceptibly she began to sway, and her hands fluttered slowly, hardening into fists which ultimately pounded the rhythm on the side of the piano. "*Vite, vite! Schneller, schneller! Die Hunde sind hier und sie beissen sich!*"

I sank to the hassock beside the windows and looked out towards the Etoile, my eyes moving across the avenue of chestnut trees, a sadness stretching out of my fatigue to the pastel afternoon, to the white chestnut blossoms standing like lamps upon the trees. Behind me Claudio played and the Countess pounded. My sadness was raw with jealousy, and I tried not to listen while pastel evening slid across the afternoon.

“Nein, nein, Claudio. Jetzt Melankolie. Es ist Nacht und das Herz weint.”

Sometimes a word, spoken by an individual sensitized by its meaning, swells outward, pushing everything aside but itself; sometimes it expands from a person's mouth until it is no longer symbol but thing symbolized. So it was with *war, la guerre, der Krieg*—when the Countess said it. Bombs sprang like teeth from her gums, her lips were tumid with flame and blood, seared skulls and swollen bellies, and along her tongue roared a pageant as deep as time splattered with man's inhumanities, his organized uniformed hatreds, man marching gold into the golden flames, emerging, if emerging at all, melted, leaden, in pieces, and as cheap as breath.

“*Que je déteste la guerre,*” she would shriek—a cry against history. “My friend was a Jew. She had blue eyes and her hair was like in Poland, fair. Here, outside Paris, she was weeping by the roadside. You will ruin your lovely eyes, *ma chère*. And I took her to my home, you know, and hid her for three years. But someone knew. Yes, so they came and they went through all the rooms, one after the other, and they took her away to put her in the fire. That night I sat with Chopin, long, long, through the

whole night, when the gates were closed. He has known war, Chopin. You have known war, Jesse?"

"I was—no, not really."

"Claudio has known it."

Claudio nodded and took her hand.

The Countess had made burnt offerings at the altar of war, but she did not understand the god which ate of the sacrifice, and so her gestures toward him were empty, and the cloud of holy smoke rising, rising, fed and rising, smelled not of frankincense and souls but of gizzard and hair. Yet the god sucked up her offerings, lapped out at her as she sacrificed between Warsaw and Paris. Where was she to go in search of peace? Perhaps only upon the altar itself, into the column of smoke, into the jaws of the munching god she could not understand. Once, and for a little while, she had found peace by giving her music to the world. But her peace was sought out, and she no longer performed, and although we did not speak of it I believed she would never perform again, not if she had teeth and a hundred dresses and no tumor on her head nor rupture in her private parts.

"I am alone, yes, and I am always complaining. But I want no one more. In this world it is dangerous to love. When one loves, one gives. I shall not more give—not of anything."

That she did not give was only partly true, for she gave a great deal but not all. Often, during our lessons, I would become aware of an instant of hesitation rather than thought, and I would know she was refusing me, denying me her mastery. I wondered if she refused her other students too, but except for Claudio I either did not know them at all or not well enough to question. Claudio seldom spoke to me directly, and although I talked to him it would somehow never develop into a conversation; but

even if it had, I couldn't have asked him about the Countess, for she was always with us.

Still, what she did give me was enough to change the pattern of my life: I left school (but I continued to pay fees); I moved into a new neighborhood, away from distracting friends; I spent twelve or sometimes fourteen hours a day at the piano; and I almost never went out, except with the Countess. So I gave to music most of what it wanted; and then one day I learned it wanted more.

"I have to pay my rent," said the Countess. "And I have no one franc, you know. Please," and she handed me the bill, "when you pass downstairs you shall pay the concierge."

"Oh my God, you should have warned me. I haven't got that much money."

"Yes? So you will borrow. You do not know other Americans?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Good. To come now to the piano."

Ten days later, while we were dining with Claudio at the small crowded restaurant near the Countess' home, she slid a sheet of paper to me across the table. I looked down at the sum very hard, hoping it might disappear, but it didn't and the three of us were silent while I wondered how a two-month electricity bill could possibly be so high.

"It's awfully expensive, isn't it?" I said.

"You find it so? It gets cheaper now: the days become long."

Suddenly I turned to Claudio. "Look, could you help me out with this? I've just paid the Countess' rent."

"That was very kind of you. Unfortunately I have no money." And he continued eating.

"I am not worth it?" cried the Countess, and then dropped her fork with a clatter.

“I didn’t say that. I just asked Cl—”

“Am I or am I not? That is all what I ask you.”

“Certainly you are—”

“So, well, no more discussion.”

The next time we were alone, I began a carefully prepared speech. “Paris is a very expensive city, and although I hardly ever go out any more there are—”

“Claudio never goes out except to come to me.”

“All right, maybe Claudio’s not human.” The word bumped like thunder between us.

“It is not human to come to me? Please, come no more.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. I meant he wasn’t human for not going out. Everybody wants to have a little fun sometimes.”

“An artist has no right to be human.”

I was silent a long time before I spoke. “Then why don’t you perform?”

“Yes? Give me money to make teeth and tomorrow I throw you all away—all, and go to give concerts.”

“You’ll throw Claudio away too?”

“Yes, Claudio too. I give him too much already. I should throw him anyway. None of you deserve me.” She seated herself at the piano and began to play a waltz, trying to distract me. But I was firm and returned to my speech.

“What I mean is, it would be so much easier for me if I could give you a certain amount each week rather than get stuck with a pile of bills all at once.”

“*American!*” she sneered. “Tomorrow I go back to Warsaw. The Polish embassy says all will be forgiven if I go back. The Communists are good to artists. Not like you people—money, money, money. Always money.”

“If you go back to Poland—” She was trying to drum my voice away under a Liszt rhapsody. “If you go back to Poland,” I roared, “you won’t be a Countess anymore.”

She lifted her hands from the keyboard. "Do I care? I care only for my art. Tomorrow I leave."

After that, I never mentioned money again, but put a sum aside each week, under Chopin's *Mazurkas*, and waited for the bills. Nor did she mention going to Warsaw again, except one morning late in June when I came for my lesson and Claudio, pale and obviously upset, opened the door.

"Is the Countess ill?"

He was about to answer when I heard her voice moaning out of the salon: "Yes, iiiillll. I shall die."

She was sitting on the hassock beside the window, her eyes bulging and wet with tears. "My Blüthner is gone; the beautiful instrument I won in Vienna. It is sold—to American people."

"But I don't understand. I thought you *had* sold it."

"Yes, but now it is really sold. Now where can I ever find it? It goes to a place called San-san-nat, I think."

"Cincinnati."

"Yes," she sighed. "Cincinnati. O Claudio, *mon enfant*, you will come with me back to Poland. They do not steal pianos in Warsaw."

"I would go with you wherever you want," he said, then went to the piano and we were all silent while he hammered out his exercises.

Since this was supposed to be my lesson, I was annoyed with him, but I waited about a quarter of an hour before I complained. "I guess," I said to the Countess, "you're not much in the mood for working today."

"No. I have no head . . ."

"Maybe you'd better take it easy with those octaves, Claudio." I felt myself shake as I spoke.

"Yes?" he said and stopped; then he went to the Countess. "You want to go out? To have champagne, perhaps?"

"No. Go home to work. I was selfish to send you the telegram, but I was unhappy. Go home, come tomorrow for your lesson, both of you."

"Are you sure you're all right?" I asked.

"I am never all right, you know. Today worse than ever. But I will sleep. Please leave me now alone."

On the way down the faded stairs Claudio walked behind me.

"I still don't understand," I said without looking at him, "what she means about the piano being sold and *really* sold."

"She sold it in the winter to a merchant, but now he has sold it to someone else."

"But she must have expected that." We were in the street now, under the chestnut trees.

"Perhaps she did." He put out his hand to say good-bye, but I didn't take it.

"That shop in the Flea Market, it isn't hers?"

"Of course not. She tended sometimes the shop in return because the merchant promised not to sell the piano for two years. She was hoping to buy it back one day."

"And now he's gone back on his word and sold it."

"Yes." He smiled. "To Cincinnati."

"My God, how could all of you stand around and let her sell it?"

He shrugged. "She is a lovely woman. Unhappy. She too makes sacrifices. When it was necessary to sell her piano, she did not hesitate. In the end there is nothing to regret."

I had not the least idea what he was talking about, and so when his hand stretched out again, I was too confused to do anything but take it, and to watch him turn away toward the Etoile.

Summer swooped over Paris like a butterfly net. The city trembled and shook, and beat itself against the heat, then toward the end of July folded its wings inward, was silent, seemed to be dead. Shutters went up and corrugated shopfronts went down; workmen took off their denims and put on their morning-clothes (the ones they had been married in), shoved their wives into sleazy satinets and their children into communion clothes, and they all went away in trucks and buses to sit beside crumbling chateaux and stagnant buzzing lakes, to argue, swat mosquitoes, drink wine and break wind. Tourists came through, yawning and very hot, complained, took photographs of the Sainte-Chapelle, and caught the night train to Rome.

In deference to summer, and to the Countess, I rearranged one further thing: my room, so that while sitting at the piano, I could look out over the still, sunlit Avenue de Clichy and dream of Venice and of making love in a gondola. Early in July I had told the Countess I wanted to go to Italy for a short holiday.

“Very good. It is good to change scenery. It makes the blood change too. Otherwise a person’s heart shall become as mine. It aches all the time, you know. I have never any holiday. I cannot remember to have holiday in my long fifty-six years.”

She stared at me expressionless, waiting.

“Well,” I said. “There must be some way we could send you on vacation.”

“No no, Jesse. No one thinks for me. Please not to trouble to think for me. Go to your holiday. You shall take airplane, no doubt?”

“I can’t afford to take an airplane, and you know that very well. I can’t even afford to take a train if I expect to keep any money to spend in Italy. As a matter of fact, I’ve been planning to hitch-hike.”

"That is expensive? You must—"

"No, it's free. *J'y vais par auto-stop.*"

"*Ah, c'est bien!*"

And she said nothing more about it that afternoon, not even to Claudio—unless she did so during their invariably whispered conversation at her door when he arrived. But the next morning a telegram was delivered to my room.

Too tired too sick no more teach find other professor
students all egoists I alone have no one war without
strength good professors in Italie but not so good as
me goodbye bon voyage.

KATHERINE DE CHARSKI

I didn't get angry until after lunch. At first the telegram only amused me and I propped it on the music-rest while my fingers ran by themselves across the keyboard. That was part of the Countess' strength: so long as her actions were associated with her music, so long was she in a position of control, for genius, like passion, can demand without limits when demanding in its own name. And because I sat at the piano marveling at the way my fingers and wrists had learned to dance, the Countess could ask whatever she pleased.

But during lunch, I grew annoyed at her intrusion. I had been studying music for fifteen years, privately and at schools; I had been applauded and encouraged; I had won a scholarship and two prizes and had given a recital. And throughout all that time, when I stepped away from the piano no one had dared to interfere with my life, nor to link into confusion my wants as a man and my wants as a musician. Now here was this crazy, selfish, egomaniac who seemed to think it was a sin against art to have friends, to amuse oneself in any way, to be an American—

"That's the end of it," I said aloud and went down-

stairs and around the corner to the post office where I sent a telegram.

All right I have another professor a genius from Cincinnati.

JESSE

I didn't touch my piano again that day nor at all the next. Instead I slid the pile of money from under Chopin's *Mazurkas* and went out and got a dark woman with black sunken eyes and warm flesh and we rode round Paris in a taxi, stopping to eat greasy meals and to drink iced wine. Somewhere—where?—I lost this woman, so I visited friends who said I'd neglected them, and I promised I would never do it again. I told them I'd fallen in love with a toothless hag who loved a three-year-old Italian, and that they were *simply wild* about playing with each other's ruptures while I watched. My friends were delighted and we celebrated into the next evening, pouring wine upon ourselves, floating from bar to cabaret, from Montparnasse to Montmartre, through streets thick and wet with summer night, painted with neon, rumpled with crowds, sticky with cognac and stars and the sap oozing out of trees. And then, and then, suddenly, over there, on the terrace of a café, back in a corner, like birds looped into night, was Claudio with a fair round-faced girl. He whispered in her ear and her laugh was silly, girlish, desiring; and he kissed her, their mouths gluing together with the force of summer. My friends had gone on without me, had come back, now tugged at me: the night was not yet over. *Jesse, Jesse, come on, come on.* But I didn't move until their shouts roused Claudio and the girl. We stared at each other across the terrace, and then I broke away from the arms that pulled and ran to the corner into a taxi.

The Countess' windows were aflame with light. All

was darkness along the street except that long strip which formed one single blaze of white. When I pushed her bell, she came quickly to the door, opened it slightly, then threw it wide, but there was nothing extraordinary in her face. She said she hoped I had had a good time in Italy and that I should come on Tuesday *comme d'habitude* and to have the whole second movement done. .

"Why are all your lights on?"

She shrugged. "It is lonely, you know. So many rooms, all empty. It is terrible when they are dark."

She took me through the apartment, through all the ten rooms—each with a chandelier ashriek, and ourselves mirrored on the windows—which I had never seen. They were all alike, all square and empty, with perfect walls and cupids painted on the ceiling. When she led me back to the door my head was reeling from the light, and she told me please not to come drunk to her again nor at three in the morning when she is always sick and does not fall to sleep anyway and yes! please (crushing a sheet of paper into my hand) to pay the concierge the gas next time I came. Good night.

If, in the weeks that followed, Claudio had shown some feeling, if he had condescended to suspicion or worry, I know I would have felt great warmth for him, sided with and nursed his hypocrisy. But he showed nothing: no concern, no fear I might expose him. Consequently I became unpleasant in very subtle ways—perhaps too subtle, for he never seemed to notice my nasty smile, my innuendoes, my killing stare. So, where we had touched as human beings we were pushed further apart; surely he had seen me that night, and his refusal afterwards

to acknowledge this made me understand that I was not even a threat, that it was after all my word against his, and that if it ever evolved to a contest the Countess would never doubt whose word was truth.

But I was not interested in contests, nor did I have the time for them, or for anything else. Almost anything else. For there were nights when, overtired, lying under a featherbed of late summer heat, deep deep my bones iced by lonesome days, I would leave my room for a while to sit in silence opposite a friend or to walk along the Boulevard de Rochechouart feeling pale, frozen, emasculate among the roaring Arabs and American soldiers and soldiers of the French Union—until a girl would pull me through a dark doorway up to a dim red room. “Nice boy *mais* pale face. Why you *portes* not unyform?” Because I’m a musician. “*Tiens!*” And later: “The love, it is gooder as music, *bein?*” Yes, gooder and cheaper and so much less troublesome. Then out the dim red room, out the dark doorway. “Nice boy. *Vrai* man. Come tomorrow *mais portes* unyform, yes?”

At the end of August I could play the *Appassionata* while Beethoven smiled at me, each of us pleased with the other. Chopin, too, took pleasure in me, but without mercy, as I mastered his first concerto and played four studies so quickly I couldn’t tell when I missed notes. As a reward, or possibly because Claudio didn’t go with her—five times that month he declined her invitations: “He must work,” she said, “if he shall give recital in winter”—the Countess took me once to Père Lachaise and once to Salle Pleyel, the hall from which, after a recital in 1838, she had been carried on the shoulders of a crowd gone wild with her music.

“It was so cold and I had only on my gown. This way we went.” And full of excitement we followed that long-

ago midnight crowd to the Place des Ternes. "And then—come, Jesse—through Avenue Wagram." And at last to the Arc de Triomphe. "I was sneezing already, and we were by the Arch. All the cars had to stop there were so many people, and all were singing and screaming. I said, come, come to my home all of you. And they came, hundreds of them, and we drank champagne and the rooms were full, full of furniture and full of young people and old people, and I played until the morning. I played on my Blüthner, and then for a change I played on my Steinway, and then on my Pleyel, and then on my Gaveau. All night it was Chopin and Liszt—and then in the morning it was Bach. And then all of a sudden I was not there, and no one was there—and I was in bed two months with pneumonia. But did I care? I had so many journals to read, you know. I was everywhere in the paper: Katherine de Charski makes big riots in the Etoile." She sighed. "It is a pity I did not die from the pneumonia—then, when life was lovely to live."

"You don't mean that."

"Yes? I do not mean that?" She spat suddenly on the walk. "What do you know what I mean? You think I should not to have died then? Only to live so my students can take take take from me and give me nothing and kill me?"

We turned away from the route of her triumph, going silently up another avenue where Claudio was to meet us later on.

Autumn lay above September—a warm thickish veil that shut the sun away at first in early morning, then throughout the morning, then for a string of days. When

the mist lowered, the cold came, an acid insidious cold that cut from the bone outward so that one's innards felt like broken glass. The air was made of a smoky rain that neither dropped nor lifted but hung, undulating slightly, a wall between subject and object, but a wall which after days became an object in itself, developed its own special and fascinating personality. It became ultimately something to gaze at and wonder about, and I was doing just that that morning in October as I walked up the avenue. There was nothing else to see: not my legs below me nor the tempo-rubato line of chestnut trees above, nor the houses, nor the Arch.

When I turned from the fog into the Countess' building, the usually pale walls and pink carpeting dazzled me. I passed the girl, almost without noticing, on the landing of the second floor, for she was back against the wall, waiting for me to pass. I didn't recognize her immediately since her face had seemed fuller that summer night; now it was thin, slightly blue, and small; the eyes bulged dark and watery, their large heavy lids shucking up and down rapidly. When I paused on the step above and stared at her, she thumped her hands into the pockets of her coat and walked to the edge of the landing, about to descend.

“*Je m'excuse, Mademoiselle,*” I began, my voice harsh as a bark; and it was through this harshness that I realized how much I hated the girl, how far I would go to avoid any contest with Claudio and to protect the Countess from his deceit.

She hesitated, then turned, terrified. “*Monsieur?*”

“I remember you.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“What are you doing here?”

Instead of answering she shrieked, then started to cry and flew wildly down the steps, her coat blowing out be-

hind her. I ran up to the third floor and pushed the Countess' bell, but she did not come to the door. I continued to push the buzzer, my finger turning red with the pressure, and I heard the steady scream of the bell within. Then suddenly her voice was behind the door, the words muffled and indistinguishable.

"It's me: Jesse."

"Leave, please."

"Let me in. What's the matter? Is anything wrong?"

"Leave."

"If you don't let me in I'll ring your bell all day."

"Do I care? Please to leave."

"No, I won't."

"I go now."

"No no, listen to me." I hesitated. "I've seen the girl."

The locks clucked back and the door opened and although she was dressed in kimono and golden pumps, the elastic bandage was not on her head but twined around her arm. Her hair stood straight up on her head like frozen grass.

"I don't know what she told you," I said, pushing my way in and shoving the door closed behind us. "But whatever it was, it isn't true. I know her—"

"Yes?" In the gloom of the corridor, her face was yellow and parched, all flesh drawn to the small puckered lips. "She has told me you saw her once."

"Listen to me, please listen to me. I don't care what she said to you. You mustn't care either. Nothing matters but music. Do you hear? Nothing else matters. You've taught me that. Do you understand? I know that nothing else matters. And you know it. And Claudio knows it. He doesn't care about anyone but you."

"Yes? Get out. Get out of here. I want nothing more from you or him or none of you. Get out."

"I won't."

“Yes, if not I call police. Go both of you, make babies not music.”

“Babies?”

“Yes.” She nodded, rounding her arms before her belly. “She is, poor child, a student. She says he will not marry her because of me. Did I stop him making love to her?”

“Did he send her here?”

“He does not know. While he was sleeping she was looking in his papers. It was only one address he had. Now you know—get out, and do not never come back. I am alone and I want always to be alone. I have lost everyone: my husband, my sister, my mother, my friend.” But now all five fingers went up. “I give him everything, you know. Why do I sell my Blüthner? It was for him—all the money. I sell it to Americans and break my heart so he shall have money to live, so he shall not go back to Italy. Does he care? Yes, go all, make babies.”

“So what if he makes babies? Bach made twenty-five babies.”

“No, twenty-one.”

“All right, twen—”

“After he was big artist. I told the girl, go, my child, tell him to marry you, make many babies, but I make no more musicians.” Her face was set, and she snapped the elastic bandage on her arm. I went past her, throwing open the door to the salon, and seated myself at the piano, beginning the Chopin concerto. She strode in after me, paused, and said in a voice deep and severe as an angry man’s: “Stop to play or I break your fingers.” I stopped. “Now, go. I care nothing for you. I would make him great artist; now he is finished. I teach him everything; I tell him all the mysteries of piano. To you, nothing. I could make—”

“Shut up.”

"You are an American; you have no culture. You shall never be anything."

"You're disgusting. You don't care about music. You only care about yourself and your own—"

"Yes? So get out."

"All right. I'm getting out."

"Filthy American. Filthy stupid American," she screamed after me as I ran through the salon, through the corridor, out of the apartment and down the stairs.

In the street, in the fog, I continued running until I slammed into the wet bark of a chestnut tree. Then I paused, my cheek against the tree, my anger run out, and I wondered if I had ever heard the Countess mention Claudio's address. I would go to see him, but what could I possibly say? I knew she gave him several lessons a week, and I knew that one followed mine on Tuesdays, so I went down the avenue to do my waiting in a movie. I sat through two showings of an Italian comedy and there was much screaming in which my spirit participated and rejoiced; it gave me a headache but I left the theater calm and reasonable. Why, this was only another aspect of the Countess' return to Warsaw or my trip to Venice; by this time the voyages were over, and she was preparing to give Claudio his lesson.

Part of my optimism was perhaps due to the weather, for the mist had begun to draw back, snapping into a light cold rain which sharpened and cleared the air. When I reached the building, Claudio was coming out of the door, looking down at his feet, a music-folder under his arm. He jumped when I spoke to him.

"Did she let you in?" I asked.

"Wh— no."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes." He looked nervously around the street. "Such a

foolish girl. I could kill her." Then with some effort he fixed his eyes on me. "You had your lesson?"

"Yes."

"You are not speaking the truth." But I think at that moment he believed me.

"Would it have been so awful for you if I'd had my lesson and you hadn't had yours?"

"It would have been impossible. I know the Countess. It could not have happened."

"Why?"

"One day we shall talk about many things. But now it is better we shut up and work the piano. She will be better tomorrow."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I think so." His teeth clamped together, his lips fluttering rapidly across the words: "Nothing will stop me."

And then, his back bent slightly, he went up the street looking thin beneath the chestnut trees which had gone full green into the fog and had come out skeletal, knotted.

I went up to the Countess' door and pushed her bell for a quarter of an hour and then I went to another film, but this one I neither saw nor heard. Instead I rewatched and relistened to each of the day's incidents, cheating myself into the center of it all, as if I were the core of every conversation. Now and then my mind would thrust me to the outside and I would feel like an enormous wound, intrusive and irrelevant, throbbing, ugly.

It was almost seven o'clock when I went back to the house, but this time, before I reached the stair, I heard the concierge rapping at her glass.

"*Elle est sortie*," she said, looking troubled.

"Sortie? Where did she go?"

She shrugged her fat shoulders and writhed her mouth. "I don't know. She looked terrible. What's the matter?"

"Didn't you talk to her?"

"Only for a minute. She said she must hurry or it would be too late. Too late for what? I don't know. She talked otherwise as always—how she is alone in the world. Poor thing; but we're all alone, aren't we?" She smiled.

"No," I said coldly. "Are you sure she didn't say where she was going?"

"She said nothing. Perhaps some nonsense about Chopin."

"She said she was going to Chopin?"

"Something like that."

On the dark street again, as I waved for a taxi, I looked back at the building now all lit but for the long black strip on the third floor. A cab pulled up for me and I told the driver to hurry to Père Lachaise, but he went slowly because the streets were filled with evening traffic and the roads were wet. When we stopped before the cemetery, the gates were bolted, the rain pouring on the walls and on the two swollen *pissotières* which stood, under their moon-shaped lights, before the gates, like pompous sentinels.

I paid, left the cab, and ran along the wall to the end of the street, then into the tunnel and up the stone stairs leading to the watchman's tower. He was an old man in a uniform, and he was reading a newspaper, his feet up on the window-ledge, his trousers unbuttoned to ease his belly. When I tapped at the glass above the door, he pushed the newspaper several inches to the side of his face and squinted at me. "What is it?"

"Open the door, please."

He shook his head. "Forbidden."

"There's a woman hiding in the cemetery."

He shook his head. "No. The cemetery is closed and everyone is out."

"Let me talk to you a minute. Can't I come in? It's pouring out here."

"Forbidden," he said again. "Come back in the morning."

"Don't you understand? She's hiding in there at Chopin's grave and it's pouring. She'll die there."

"Why not? It's a cemetery." And he went back to his paper, but I pounded on the window until he looked at me again.

"Listen, if you let me in the cemetery I'll give you money."

"How much?"

I looked through my pockets. "Six hundred francs. That's all I've got." He shook his head. "But I'll bring you ten thousand later on. Just let me in now."

He laughed. "Forbidden. Go away or I'll telephone for the police."

The police. "Never mind. I'll go myself. Where's the station?"

His directions were vague and complicated and, in fact, altogether wrong, for the building was just around the corner. The station was one high wide room furnished with a long desk, an empty bicycle rack, and a chicken-wire cage imprisoning a half-dozen prostitutes who were screaming about freedom and justice. The two men at the desk laughed all the time I spoke and shouted back at the prostitutes.

"So, for the love of God," I concluded, "get the watchman to let me in."

One of the men picked his nose, and the other said: "Let's see your papers."

"What have my papers got to do with it?"

"Give me your papers!" he roared.

I handed him my passport, and he flipped through it. "It seems to be in order," and he passed it to the other man who took his finger out of his nose and put it on my photograph. "In order," he agreed.

"Now will you come over with me so that I can—"

"Come back in the morning when the office is open upstairs."

"But she's there now. She's a sick woman. You can't—"

"Get out."

"Aren't you human?"

"If you open your mouth again, I'll rip it out of your face. Get out."

So I took a taxi home and had it wait while I slid all the fifteen thousand francs from under the *Mazurkas*, and on the way back to the cemetery I asked the driver to stop at the Countess' house. He did, but her windows were still dark, and the concierge said no, she had not returned.

It was after ten o'clock when I climbed once more to the watchman's tower, and now someone else was there: a young nervous man with a sharp nose to whom I offered five, then ten, then all the fifteen thousand francs. He was not to be bribed and said he supposed I had come to steal flowers, and because I continued to plead he pulled a shade over the window and over the door. I pounded a while, then left, and walked round the cemetery and at last stopped into a café across the way where a sign hung in the window: *On est mieux ici qu'en face*. Within, the air steamed full of smoke and the smell of coffee, and the tiled floor was aslush with mud and sawdust. Two workers in blue overalls played chess in a corner and the bartender sang to himself while he turned glasses upside down for the night. I took a white wine at the bar and was soon talking

to the other three men who recognized my accent and wondered how I came to be so far from home. Ultimately I told them about the Countess and what had happened.

"You're certain she's in there?" asked the bartender.

"Yes."

"Well," said one of the workers, "I would let her stay there if she called *me* a filthy American."

"She didn't mean it. She was just upset."

"All the same," said the second worker. "How can an American be filthy when they all have baths?"

So we laughed and I ordered wine for all of us, and then the bartender said: "I have a small ladder in back and perhaps you can climb over the wall." He hesitated. "Of course it would be trouble if we were caught."

"We can go around behind," one of the workers said, "where the factory is."

The bartender brought the ladder and we crossed the street and walked to the far side of the cemetery where there were no street-lights and where the factory shadowed away the wall. The two workers started arguing about the best place to lean the ladder, and soon they were shouting.

"Shut your skull," said the bartender. "And watch to see if anyone passes."

Then, where the wall seemed most concealed from the street, we put the ladder up against the flood of ivy. I climbed to the last rung and the three men took my legs and hoisted me.

"Can you reach?" they whispered.

"No, lift me a bit more."

And they did, one of them going up the ladder behind me, pushing me while the ladder began to slide along the wall, my hands clutching the ivy until it tore. "Straighten the ladder," I begged. "Straighten it a bit more and I'll reach."

They lifted me higher, but the ivy was thin toward the top and my fingers could not cling to the wall. Finally, shivering and exhausted, I had to come down, and we brought the ladder back to the café. I had more wine and talked with the bartender until I realized that he would rather close up and go to bed. So I left and walked once more around the wall, past the heap of shredded ivy in the factory shadows, past the watchman's tower—his window now uncloaked—and since I could think of nowhere else to go, I went back to the gates and sank to the walk before them. Thus, I waited, while the rain fell, then stopped, then fell again, while the smell of the *pissotières* clogged the air, while the gaslight haunted the ivy and the street, while I almost forgot why I waited or for whom—remembering only that morning must come and that, even unbribed, the watchman would descend from his tower and swing open the gates to let all the mourners in.